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UNCONSCIOUS LINEAGE

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ABSTRACT:

The following stories, “Cellar Doors,” “The Truth About Rockford,” and “Disreputable Uncles” are three stories from a collection of stories about four generations of women and their families, who face — and sometimes conquer — challenges that are all too common in our lives. They include the misery of being a sibling, and the terrifying power and overwhelming helplessness of being a parent, and the desperation that can latch on to us at any time in our lives.

These stories ARE about the characters’ individual struggles, but they are also about unconscious lineage and how family traditions and community mores affect our unconscious responses (regardless of our ages) — many of which are a result our parents’ decisions and the mistakes that they have made. The main recurring characters are Birdie, Lottie, Ellie, and Mattie. The stories span several decades, and encounter the characters at various stages of their lives.

Cellar Doors

I

The houses on Clarence Street and, more importantly, their front porches, all stood in a line twelve feet from the boulevard sidewalk. The houses themselves were narrow, pinched-face two-stories with steep roofs and dormer windows squeezed in wherever possible. Each house possessed a tiny front yard, which really only existed to provide some welcoming green to a visitor. The useful space was saved for the back yards, where patios and barbecue grills, awaited the typical Saturday night gathering where some neighbor would slam a window in warning that they'd had enough of the fun. All the houses on the block were situated this way except for one. The house next door to ours — the Jensens' house — sat all the way at the back of the lot, with only room for two parking spots and a small shed between the house and the alley. This flip-flop of house and yard meant that the Jensens' front yard and backyard space were essentially combined creating a large expanse of unbroken green, which ended where our backyard began.

The Jensen house was as unique in appearance as it was in placement; it was a white two-story with a barn style roofline. It had large windows with faded peach trim. The porchless front door was overcome with hedges, which never mattered, since no one

ever entered the house through the front. Instead of running up the middle of the yard, the Jensens' front walk-way followed the southern property line, and emptied onto a stone patio that shared a canopy of oak leaves and branches with our back yard. The previous owners of our houses had apparently argued about who was responsible for trimming the tree since its trunk sat squarely on the property line, and the cyclone fence erected some thirty years before had been caught up in the bark and roots of the tree. My dad and Mr. Jensen trimmed the tree together each spring, and they left the squabbling to the squirrels that chased each other up and down the trunk.

The house that I grew up in possessed not only a front and back door, but also a side door. Our side door led directly to our basement steps, and also to our kitchen. Our back door was actually a set of double doors that opened onto the back patio, and was sort of fancy for the neighborhood. However, the side doors were a common feature in our part of town, and perhaps led to the close connections that developed between the neighbors. Most of the backyards were fenced, but the occurrence of a side door offered a standing invitation, especially to the kids on the block. We played ball in the street, like most kids in our day, and our kick-the-can games always involved multiple yards — usually centered around the Jensens' open front yard. If we wanted a friend to come out to play, we would go and stand near the side door of their house and yell: “Call for Mattie!” or “Call for Jimmy!” You always knew someone was getting a game together, when you heard voices hollering up and down the street, and even if you didn’t get called, you

could still go out and play — maybe chase down overthrown balls, if you were the littlest one around.

All of the kids in the neighborhood learned to ride a bicycle on the same two-wheeler. It was a red, yellow and some ugly, old green that had been spray painted on to cover the rust — a small Frankenstein bike that had been fixed up more times than anyone could keep track of. By the time I learned on it, nobody even remembered who had originally owned the thing. The tradition in the neighborhood was that your parents would buy you your own bike only after you learned to ride on the Frankenstein bike. You spent as little time on it as possible, not just because you were hoping your parents would buy you the latest model of Spyder or Wheelie bike with the sleek banana seat and sissy bar, but because every kid in the neighborhood knew you were a baby who hadn't learned to ride a bike yet.

Many of the neighborhood families went to church together, but we celebrated baptisms, first communions, and confirmations with giant pot luck parties regardless of the specific religious affiliation of the families involved. Maybe it was because it was the '70's and an era of greater respect. In any case, I lived on Clarence Street between the Walkers and the Jensens for nearly a decade, and I am sure I don't know the denomination of either family, although I am just as sure that my family attended the baptisms of all of their children.

The Jensens had a side door that opened onto their patio near the front of their house — well really onto a set of smooth, wooden steps that had turned gray over the years. The doorway was fitted with a wood-frame screen door, the sort every child in northern Minnesota remembers the sound of. Those doors had stiff springs that creaked loudly in protest as you stretched the door open. When you let the door go the the spring would yawn and hang there hesitantly, and then would snap the door closed all at once with a slap and a bang. It was the sound of our fathers coming home in the evening, and it meant we all needed to wash up for dinner. Or maybe it was our mothers going out to turn on the sprinkler, which signaled the ten minutes of teasing that you knew were coming from your big brother, until *slam* he was a perfect angel again. The Jensens had a second side door, an amazing thing to my six-year-old self, that opened closer to the rear of the house, near their gravel driveway and the alley that ran behind the houses. Their patio ran the length of their house and filled all the space between their house and our fence. It provided a home to a random collection of wrought iron furniture and wheeled riding toys that all the neighborhood kids felt comfortable borrowing.

There was one other entrance into the Jensen home, which we were never allowed to use, but which we were ever conscious of as a portal to a black, cavernous world: a set of traditional cellar doors that stood at the standard thirty-degree angle to the ground next to the back of the house. These were almost always closed. An iron latch with a solid padlock kept the curious neighborhood children from wandering in and out at will. The Jensens' yard was the only one on the block that wasn't fenced, so it provided a through way from the street to the alley and beyond — to our friends' houses whose fronts faced

the next street over. Sometimes, one of us would happen through the yard and find the doors thrown open. You couldn't help but stop to peer into the blackness that seeped out of the cellar. Sometimes if you looked hard enough and for long enough, you could catch sight of Mr. Jensen in a funny helmet, caught in the orange glow of torch and melting metal.

II

“Daddy, can I play in the yard?” I yell as I run down the stairs to find my dad. By “yard” my father knows I mean the Jensens' yard as well as our own. He is standing in front of a table saw in the basement, sawing boards for panelling. Later, the basement will reek of oil-base stain, as my mother stains the boards after sanding them to a rose-petal-soft surface. My parents approach the remodeling of the basement in the same way they do most things. My father does the planning, the rough-cuts, the hammering, and my mother focuses on the subtle details that bring out the warmth and beauty of the project.

My father waves his hand without looking at me. “Yeah, yeah. But bring me a beer first. Put it in the foam cup-holder.” I do as he asks, and then run up the stairs and outside. It is Saturday, and my mom is at the grocery store. Since my dad is home, I have escaped the shopping trip today. My best friend Denise is waiting for me on the stone wall on the far side of the Jensens' yard. She has a shoebox filled with gum wrappers next to her and is weaving them together to make a chain. The colors of the blocks in the chain vary to make a pattern: white for the Wrigley's Spearmint gum, green

for Double-Mint, yellow for Juicy Fruit, and red for Big Red. I sit down and take up the other end of the chain and begin weaving.

Denise is a girly-girl. She wears dresses, plays baby-dolls, and weaves gum-wrapper chains. She's a little embarrassed to play with me at school because I'm a grade behind her, but I'm the only other girl in our neighborhood that is even close to her age. When my mom could no longer stand the cowlicks of my hair ruining the sleek style, and finally had my hair cut into a pixie cut, Mrs. Pedersen up the street called me "the little boy who lives down the street." I was afraid that Denise would agree with description because she has sleek, strawberry blonde hair that lays down flat. But the day Mrs. Pedersen called me a boy to my face, Denise was the one who stood up for me. The kids up and down the street picked it up, and for a week they had been chanting it whenever I walked past. My mom had told me to ignore them. "They're just jealous they don't have such cute hair." She said. But Denise could not believe I would walk away from such injustice.

Several of us were jumping rope in the alley behind the Pedersen house one afternoon, and Mrs. Pedersen came out to her garden. "Are you girls playing jump rope with that little boy who lives down the street?" Her thin, reedy voice nearly screeched it out. Mrs. Pedersen had known me my whole life; there was no question that she knew who I was.

I wanted to run away as the other girls, particularly Nancy Pedersen who babysat for me regularly, sniggered behind their hands. Nancy was the most beautiful girl I had

ever known with golden hair and golden skin, and even gilded-orange toe-nail polish.

She was the only girl I knew who could jump rope in sandals.

Before I realized what she was up to, Denise took me by the hand and walked me right up to where Mrs. Pedersen was gathering rhubarb stalks. “Look.” Denise said. “This is Mattie Foerstner, who lives two doors down. I think you might not be able to see her face from across the yard. Did you want me to ask Mrs. Foerstner if she could drive you to town to get new glasses?”

From that day on, Denise has been my best friend. Even if she does like to make gum-wrapper chains.

* *

Later that afternoon, I stand at the window of our second story playroom and look out at the flat expanse of grass that is the Jensens' front yard. The grass is bordered on one side by the walkway to the Jensens' house and a three-foot stone wall on the other. I can see the spot on the stone wall where Denise and I wove our gum-wrapper chain earlier. Next to the stone wall is a steep hill going up to the pale green house that belonged to the Pedersens. The Pedersens own the hill and all the vines and plants growing on it. Unlike the Pedersens, who have flowers and plants even growing out of their basement window-wells and the cracks in their sidewalk, the Jensens don't really have any garden area at all. Outside of the overgrown hedges at the front of the Jensens' house, and the grass of their front lawn, the giant fir tree is the only plant-life on the Jensens' property. From my second-story perspective, the tree still looks immense. It is

every bit as tall as the Pedersens' house, which is not only a two-story but also sits on a hill.

While I am measuring the tree with my eyes, Mr. Jensen wheels his mower to the edge of the yard and yanks on the pull-starter. He begins the crosshatch design that must look as nice from his second story window as it does from mine. My brother Jimmy and his best friend Daniel Jensen both come into view carrying hand-clippers. Jimmy walks down to the front end of the sidewalk and Daniel to the back, actually out of my view. I see Jimmy raise his hand and give the starting wave, and they begin clipping toward each other. I picture me and Denise out there in place of the boys. Denise is one grade ahead of me, and Daniel is one grade ahead of Jimmy. I like the idea of doing yard work with my best friend. I have never actually seen Denise work, though. We only play together. She and I have never done dishes or even picked up toys together. Jimmy and I work pretty well together when our friends aren't around. I like that about our family. We clean the house together, pick up the toys together, do the dishes together — all of us.

I've seen Daniel and his dad do other work together, too. They move the same way, their bodies swaying with the same rhythm. They hold tools, use rakes, open doors all with the same movements... leaning slightly to the right, leading into the shed with their heads ducked just a bit. When Daniel puts his hand into his pocket, he makes his hand into a fist, locks his elbow, and cocks his shoulder. I hear our side door slam and look down into the yard where Mr. Jensen is turning off the mower. He walks toward our house, and my dad steps off our stoop to meet him, popping the top of a beer can and handing it to him. Mr. Jensen accepts the beer with one hand, retrieving a bandana from

his back pocket with the other. He wipes his forehead, returns the cloth to his back pocket, and slides his hand into his front pocket. He locks his elbow and cocks his shoulder, and I imagine the hand in his pocket is now a fist.

* * *

Mr. Jensen is a nice man, even though he has that funny way of looking at you that makes it seem like he is looking through you. My dad likes him, so maybe he only looks at kids that way. He likes to do work in his basement, like my own dad, but my dad make things out of wood, and Mr. Jensen makes things out of metal. My dad built the Jensens' side steps, and Mr. Jensen made the railing for our front steps. Mr. Jensen is taller than my dad — actually a lot taller — but he has a soft face, reddish brown hair and pale blue eyes — the color of the water in the public swimming pool. Looking into his eyes makes me feel that tiny, tight feeling that you get when you are on a bike ride and you start to think that you might be lost. But then you blink and see a house you know, and the feeling dissolves almost completely. My dad has sharp black eyes that don't miss a thing and will poke you like a needle if you are misbehaving. He doesn't have to touch me or yell at me to make me cry. When he looks at me with those eyes, just the right way, I know that he knows all the bad things I've done.

My dad is always figuring out how many boards he needs for his next project and how many will actually fit in the car. He keeps a log in the car of how much gas he uses, and if you're in the car with him when he stops for gas, you have to write down the

mileage on the odometer and the number of gallons that he puts into the car, and you better bring your math brain along because he makes you do the arithmetic for the gas mileage. He always has a pencil behind his ear and a steno pad to write down measurements — and he is constantly looking for the tape measure. When I watch my dad think, I can see when an idea clicks into place behind those eyes.

* * * *

The Jensens have a calico cat, a cocker spaniel, a bull snake, a terrarium full of toads, and a hamster cage — the plastic kind with the tubes and an exercise wheel — full of mice. I used to think they were hamsters until a friend of mine got a hamster for her birthday, and I realized how different her hamster is from the little critters that live in that cage at the Jensens'. The Jensens have all those pets — an uncountable number of pets — and only one kid. We have three kids in our house and NO pets. None. *Zero. Zip. Nada.* As my brother would say.

That calico cat of the Jensens just had kittens, though... and I have hopes.

I go to visit those kittens every day that my mother will let me. In the beginning, they are so tiny, they can't even open their eyes. I think their eyes look like lumps on the sides of their heads. Mrs. Jensen won't let me hold any of them at first, but every day they get bigger, and their mom seems less protective. The mom cat is a long-haired calico and her fur is a blaze of colors. Orange, black, yellow, rusty-red, and brown

running through a creamy white. Her kittens, on the other hand, are an odd mix. A few have several of her colors mixed together, but most only have two colors. One kitten is only white and tan. One is white and orange. Every time one of those kittens gets adopted, I run home and tell my mom. I beg her over the course of a few weeks to please let *me* adopt one. “I’ll take care of it all by myself,” I say. “I WILL scoop the chunks out of the kitty litter!” I insist. And finally, I promise, “I will vacuum up the fur every day.” But she never gives in. Apparently, we’re just not cat people. Not on my mother’s side or my father’s side.

Eventually, the kittens all have new homes — all but one. No one really wants the runt. He is dark gray with a white face, and only has one eye. The ear on the same side as his missing eye is folded over and mangled. He also has a short, stubby tail. His missing eye is closed, so you can’t see into the socket. But I know there is no eye there. I remember when he was only a day or so old, only one side of his head had a bump on it. When all the other kittens opened their eyes, he only opened the one.

After a while, Daniel names him Toad the Cat — someone has said, “That’s a real toad of a cat you have there.” And just like that, he becomes Daniel’s cat. No pleading, no promising. He hangs around Daniel when he’s home. When Daniel is not around, Toad the Cat lies on the one square of cement between our houses that stays sunny all day while he waits for Daniel to show up.

Toad the Cat may be the ugliest cat I’ve ever seen, but his mom, Kiki, is the most beautiful. I have fallen in love with her while I am visiting her kittens. Mrs. Jensen still

lets me come over whenever I want to pet her, so that Saturday, after the boys are finished trimming the grass and the dads have retreated to their respective basements, I knock on the Jensens' door and open it to step in... and Kiki streaks out through the crack. I let the door slam, and take off after her. Around the front of the house, through the front yard. She runs toward the wall and the hill that goes up to the Pedersens' house. I watch for where she might end up — will she go through the brush and the dead plants into the Pedersens' yard? But she is dissuaded by the Pedersens' sheepdog, Cocoa, who is on her chain in their back yard. Kiki goes only halfway up the hill and starts back down. And then she disappears under the giant fir tree. I step back, and move around the side of the tree, watching for her to come out. I can't imagine that she will want to stay under there, as crowded as it must be with branches and needles. I wait, but she doesn't come out. Two minutes, three minutes, five minutes pass.

My brother comes out of our house and asks what I am doing. "I'm waiting for the cat to come out." I tell him.

"Forget it." He says. "Once she's in there, she won't come out for hours. We're going to the field. Why don't you get your bike and see if you can keep up with us? Ha!" He runs toward the garage.

It isn't really an invitation. He and Daniel would never take me along unless our moms make them. Maybe Mom has told him he is supposed to take me with him today...? But I don't want to go. I want to stay with Kiki.

So, just in case my mom wants me to go with Jimmy, I walk over to the stone wall, and tuck myself in around the backside of the giant fir. I sit on the stone wall with

my tennis shoes dangling in the branches. My shoelace snags on some dried needles, and as I jerk my foot around to free the lace, the branch moves, and the brown needles tinkle to the ground. I suddenly realize that I can see them falling even deep within the tree. I peer carefully, and take a hold of the branch. I push it to the side, which clears my view all the way to the center trunk.

I slip between the branches and, ducking my head, I fold myself down onto my knees, and end up in a cavern created by the canopy of branches.

I don't really understand why, but sometimes I need a place where I can go and just be me, by myself. Not a little sister, or a big sister, or a daughter — or even a girl. Just me. I need a quiet, dark place that no one knows about. One where I can hear my mom calling, but where I can hover on the edge of solitude for a few extra minutes before I have to appear *hale and whole* at her feet. And that space is not to be found in our neat little house, with its perfectly rectangular, brightly lit rooms.

But outside, the snow is gone. The air is warm and the grass has grown enough to need mowing. Soon, school will be over, and it will be summer.

* * * *

I have spent an entire afternoon under the tree, some of the time with Kiki, but mostly by myself. When Denise comes to my house to call me out to play, I watch from between brown branches and green needles without being able to say anything, unless I

want to give away my secret. My mom comes to the door, and then Denise walks away, scuffing her shoes on the Jensens' patio stones.

That evening at the dinner table, all I can think about is how I missed playing with Denise earlier. Maybe I will show her my secret tonight. “May I go out and play after dinner?” I ask. I hear Daniel’s voice outside in the yard calling for Jimmy.

“Okay, sit up and finish up your carrots.” My mom turns to Jimmy, “Go tell Daniel you’ll be out after you clear the table. Mattie, you have to rinse the dishes, then you can go back outside for a little while, if you still want. I hardly even saw you today. What were you doing outside?” Jimmy comes back to the table, he picks up his plate while our mom is looking at me. He covered his remaining carrots with napkins and silverware, and quickly escapes to scrape the miserable carrots into the trash can.

“Oh, uh, I was just doing chalk drawings on the stone wall by the Pedersens’.” I mumble this between bites of carrots, hoping that my dislike for the vegetables will cover my lie. It is only a partial lie anyway, since I did do some drawings on the wall.

I’m not a good liar, but I want to keep my secret for myself. I decide right then that I won’t even share it with Denise.

III

After the last day of school, I walk away from three-story brick school building, past the lines of rowdy kids waiting for buses, and past the clouds of exhaust from the lines of buses waiting to enter the circular driveway. The supplies in my bag drag on my

shoulder, and as I pass the the crossing guard, I swing my bag in front of my body to my other shoulder. I feel like my whole desk is inside this bag. I had hoped my mom would come to meet us like she has done previous years on the last day of school. Then I could put my bag in the basket of Charlie's stroller. I wish Denise was walking with me and we were looking forward to changing into our new swimming suits and running through the sprinkler squealing at the cold. Instead, Denise's mom picked her up from school early to leave for vacation, and my mom is home with Baby Charlie, so I walk by myself. I walk by Mark Beltz's house. Since kindergarten, whenever I pass his house, I think about Mark's dad, Mr. Beltz, and I wonder how big of a belt he wears. Or maybe he wears more than one. I often imagine a giant belt around his whole house, tightening up in the middle to give the house a waist.

I see Jimmy walking about a half a block ahead of me with Daniel. I hurry a bit, and keep them in my sight. They turn; I turn — a half a block behind. Engrossed in watching them and the super ball they are bouncing back and forth, I allow the surroundings to blur around me. When I look up, I realize we are no longer near our own neighborhood. I am surprised, but not really worried. I can back track, I think. They turn again, and I quicken my pace. But they are going into the field up ahead, at the top of the hill. I know the field, just not this part, since we are blocks over from where we usually enter and play.

There are some trees at the edge of the field, and then another group of trees halfway across. Amid the second group of trees is a collection of discarded appliances, an old car with no doors or tires, and an ancient farm tractor with weeds growing up

through its middle. Its missing front wheel causes the tractor to tilt forward awkwardly, like a giraffe at the zoo bending down to get a drink.

The boys are in the car with their heads down, maybe looking under the dashboard. While crossing the open field, I plan to leave as soon as I have a peek at the boys. I decide that once I arrive at the trees, and see what they are up to, I will turn around and go home without saying anything. I like the idea of knowing something about them that they don't know I know. But now that I am here, I feel mesmerized by the tractor, and I walk straight over to it and reach out to touch the paint that is no longer paint. I want to think the tractor is red, like Uncle Norm's, but I can't tell for sure. The boys voices fade in and out of my awareness: discovering, exclaiming, arguing. I clear some of the weeds out from around the tractor and spot a section by the back tire that is a perfect step for my foot, and I climb up onto the tractor's rusted-out seat.

The sun moves behind a cloud and I look up and realize that I feel hot. I refuse to care and don't even push the hair back that is stuck to my face. There is a lever near the steering wheel that I want to move, need to move, before the boys discover me, which I know they will do momentarily. I pulled it upwards, and the whole lever arches slightly, but doesn't budge. I put my weight into it and push down. As I lean further over, I lose my balance and topple sideways... my feeling of triumph crashes into the grass with me, making my fall seem that much worse.

The boys hear this crash, most probably because of my loud "Oof!" Their heads both pop out of the car. My brother catches sight of my red book bag on the ground where I was clearing the grass.

“Mattie! Are you spying on us? Come out, right now!”

Jimmy sounds angry, but I have heard this tone before; it is only the irritated strain of a big brother who has to share everything with his younger sister. But Daniel Jensen seems more than mad when he jumps out of the car, fists at his sides, yelling: “She’s going to ruin the whole thing!”

I try to climb back onto the tractor from the grassy side, but am sweating now with dread and the heat of the sun on the tractor. My shoe slides on the grass covered step, my sweaty hands scratch on the rusty surface and can’t hold on, but I refuse to cry as I plop back onto the ground, looking like the six-year-old that I am.

They run around the tractor, not to see if I’m okay, but to confront me.

“Mattie,” Jimmy’s voice is a little softer. “Does Mom know where you are?”

“No... She won’t care, though, if I am with you.”

“Well,” Daniel’s face comes down toward mine and blocks the sun, “what if we won’t walk home with you? Will you get in trouble then?” His sing-song voice makes fun of my fear. But I want this place more than I want to avoid my dad’s punishment.

I push Daniel away and jump up. I lean forward, my chin leading the way, but it’s like I have left part of my brain behind in the grass. “Oh, yeah?! And what if I tell them where you are and what you are doing here?” I look around at the car and at a tree nearby and then at the washing machine. “I saw you inside that car!” They look at me more closely, and I fling my arm wildly out toward the tree and the washing machine. “And I saw you peeing over there!”

I don't really know why I say that. I didn't see them peeing there. But it seems like a place where they would.

They look at each other and Daniel pulls Jimmy's arm, half dragging him back around the tractor. Angry whispers sift through the tractor toward me, but I don't care. I think I have won.

Three days later, we are back in the field. We ride our bikes here today, and I have trouble making it up the hill. The boys have allowed me to be here only on the condition that I will do some of the things that they do, so I won't tell on them. Since I supposedly saw them pee on a tree, Daniel insists that I have to pee on the tree too. While they watch. I can't refuse, but instead I say that I will pee in the washing machine. "So I can sit down," I say. There is some argument. I just say, "I'm a girl, duh." I walk over to the washing machine like I have done this many times before. I roll my bike over, and lean it against the front of the machine, and climb up. I stand on the long banana seat, pull my pants down and sit. I don't really have to pee, but I know they will check to make sure it is wet in there. They just stand there and stare at me. I tell Daniel to get a leaf for me to wipe with. He's so surprised by what I am doing that he doesn't notice that I am giving him orders.

I pull my pants back up, giving them as little of a view as possible. I climb down, and slip and scrape up my leg on a bolt on my bike, but I don't even look down at it. I feel victorious and I won't let them see me cry.

* * *

In our own yard, the boys are much nicer to me than before we had the field as our shared secret. They now let me play catch with them more often, and don't always make me the "Monkey in the Middle." In the past, Jimmy would mostly tease me when Daniel was around; he would suddenly get all tough when Daniel came over, and now, since Daniel is nice to me, it feels like Jimmy doesn't mind being nice to me either. When the bigger kids are around, the boys act like they used to. It is important that everyone knows I am not really their friend, just a kid sister. I will be seven soon, but Jimmy is nine, and Daniel is almost eleven.

The biggest change is that if I am playing by myself, and they are on their way to the field, they always ask me to come along.

I know my best friend Denise will not like what we are doing in the field, and would tell on us. She doesn't like old things, or dirty places. She likes to play dolls, and house, and dress-up. When we play outside, we don't play in the dirt. When my dad re-landscaped our back yard, and we had a giant dirt pile in our driveway, all the neighborhood kids played in that pile with us... except for Denise and her big sister Julie.

The boys have found a magazine with naked ladies in it under the seat in the car, and haven't told me about it. That is what they are looking at in there when their heads are down. They finally bring it out one day. Even though I am flat-chested still, and don't really look like the women in the magazine, Daniel wants to look more closely at my parts between my legs. Both boys will let me look at their parts too. I'm not sure I

want to, but Daniel says I can sit on the washing machine like I am going to go to the bathroom, and I can just tilt my body a little bit, so they can see. That seems okay, and once they move my bike out of the way, their eyes are almost on level with the parts of me they want to see. They show me their boy parts, but I don't want to get too close because I am afraid one of them will pee on me.

The looking seems okay, but the next time we ride out to the field, they have a new plan. They have not ever let me get into the car, but today they will, if I follow their rules. I have to take off my pants in order to get into the car. It is a new rule. They will take theirs off too. "It is only fair," Daniel says. Not just pulled down, but all the way off. I get in the car, but I am only allowed to be in the back seat. Daniel shows me a picture in the magazine where the girl has her fingers opening up folds of skin between her legs so the camera can look inside. They want me to do that, so they can look inside, and they want me to let them put their fingers there too. "So we can tell what it feels like." I make them let me touch them first, so I know they will do it. They are both very soft, but their parts start to stick out. Daniel tells me to lay back, like the lady in the magazine and open my legs. I let him look inside and touch me down there between my legs. Both Daniel and Jimmy are sitting on the seat between my legs, taking turns touching me where my pee will come out.

I know I am being naughty, and this is the stuff my mom would call "funny stuff," but it actually feels sort of tickly. I like how nice they ask me. On days I know we might go to the field, I will only wear my loose knit shorts, and take off my underwear and leave them in my drawer. My bicycle seat will rub my bottom while we ride on the

street. My shorts will get stuck in my crack and will scratch just a little, but it will feel like the good kind of scratch, like when you scratch a big mosquito bite. When we get to the field, I will climb on the tractor, or up the tree, right above Daniel so he can look up my shorts just a little. Sometimes we take off all of our clothes and get into the car together, and play truth or dare. I let Daniel put his boys parts between my legs, just to see how its soft hardness will feel there.

As the summer progresses, Jimmy and I become closer than we have ever been. When we leave for our vacation at the lake, we become our own team. We go fishing together, exploring together, and we don't try to make the other person mad, like we always used to. We don't argue about who gets to sleep in the tent or in the top bunk of the camper. We decide together that we will sleep in the tent. We don't do any "funny stuff" while we are in our own house or on vacation together, but we love each other in other ways. We do word guessing games while drawing on each other's backs and we play our favorite card games under the sleeping bag with flash lights.

Sometimes, when Jimmy pulls up my shirt to draw on my back, I will hold my breath because I am not sure where he will touch me next. Sometimes he will write a long word that will trail off the edge off my back onto my side, or he will continue the word on the next line and the tail of a letter will dip down below the waistband of my pajama pants. We snuggle when we are asleep, and sometimes just hold hands. He touches me all the time, but never in the way that we touch in field. And every touch tells me how much he loves me.

IV

And suddenly, August is over and it is time for school to start. Everyone in the neighborhood is back in town and the parents have a giant barbecue pot luck. The barbecue is on our patio and the Jensens' patio, and there is a ball game in the Jensens' front yard and in the street. It's fun, but I can't wait for Saturday morning, when it will be just Jimmy and Daniel and me out in the field.

Even the Walkers, our next-door neighbors on the other side from the Jensens, are home from their lake cabin, and in the morning my mom tells me that Bradley can hardly wait to go out to the field with us. "I told his mom about how much fun you have had out there this summer, when I saw her at the barbecue last night," she says. Bradley is in my grade, but he is even smaller than me, and is sort of a baby. I have always been nice to him, and won't let the big boys pick on him, but now he wants to go to the field with us, and I can't believe how angry I am at my mom for this. Bradley's dad's name is Walter, Wally for short, and last night, while all the parents were on the patios drinking beer, a bunch of the kids from the neighborhood were walking along the top of the Jensens' wall chanting "Wally Walker, wall-walker, waffle-wiffle..." over and over again. Bradley ran crying to his mom, so she would come over and make them stop. By the time she got to the front yard, all the kids were in the street playing baseball. I am the nicest kid I know, and I don't even want to play with him.

As we walk out to get our bikes, I think to myself that Bradley's mom will never let him come to the field with us, but as we are riding away I hear him call to her, "we are

just going on a bike ride,” and he jumps on his bike to take off after us. Jimmy and Daniel could have easily lost him, but I am too slow on the hill, and he is able to keep me in his sight. At that moment, I hate him for coming along and ruining one of the last days of summer break.

The big boys say we are playing Truth or Dare. They dare me to climb up the tree, and they dare Bradley to climb onto the washing machine and jump off. I dare Daniel to climb onto the roof of the car, and slide down the windshield. I dare Bradley to try to push me out of the seat on the tractor. The car is Jimmy and Daniel’s, but the tractor is mine, and no one messes with it. Things seem to be going okay, and I start to feel better about having Bradley along.

Then, Daniel dares Jimmy to run down the path with his shorts pulled down. Jimmy says he would do it if we all do it. Everyone agrees. I look at Bradley worriedly, but he is falling over laughing as we stumble on our pants while running down the path. It’s a short path from the washing machine to the car, and we all wait at the car for Bradley to pull his shorts down. But he won’t do it. Then he decides it will be okay to pull just the shorts down and leave the underwear up, but Daniel refuses to allow it. The anger that I was feeling earlier when Bradley’s bicycle was squeaking along behind mine rises back up fiercely. Daniel and Jimmy march over to Bradley and, each grabbing a handful of Bradley’s waist band, pull his pants down for him. When he refuses to move, they drag him down the path by his upper arms, right up to me. They present him to me the way Toad the Cat drops a mouse that he has caught at Daniel’s feet. Pulling up his

pants, Bradley sobs violently, and I struggle to find that other person inside of me that can comfort him. I reach out to calm him down. I pat his back, and whisper to him, like I do with Baby Charlie. But Bradley can't stand it; he just cries louder. He wants his mommy. So I call him a baby, trying to shame him into stopping. And then the big boys start in. Bradley runs to his bike and takes off, and my stomach feels like it will fall right out of my body as I realize what Bradley is going to do.

"Wait! Wait! Bradley!" I jump on my bike. "I'll ride home with you." He's fast and won't wait for me, and I look behind me for the big boys, but they aren't following. It's up to me to stop him. I catch up to Bradley before he reaches the street that borders the field. "C'mon, stop for a sec." I say breathlessly. "What are you going to do?" I reach out for his handle bars, and he pauses and then begins yelling at me.

"You can't make me stop! You can't make me, you can't make me! My mom won't let you." And there it was. He would tell his mom.

"This is not for grown-ups. You don't need to tell your mom. I'll help you." He begins riding away again. "I won't let the big boys hurt you again. Please don't do this." I ride along beside him. Down the hill, around all the corners, to the top of our alley, pleading all the while.

He cries the whole way home; but by the time we get to the back of my house, I am crying harder than he is.

My mom's punishments are thoughtful, my father's quick and violent. I think sometimes that when my dad gets angry, he can't even see me anymore. I suppose, in those moments, I really do want to disappear, so it works out maybe. This time is really the worst punishment because my mom is present for my father's beating, and she will not allow us to disappear even after it's over. The shaming will only be complete after we go to both the Walkers' and the Jensens' houses and apologize to Bradley and his parents and then to Daniel and his parents. Bradley and his mother wait inside their screen door for our words of atonement, while we stand on the small stoop outside the door. That stoop smells like mildew and the side of their house has patches of moss up and down the golden bricks. The sun never shines on this side of their house because it is shaded by our house and their own, and there is a giant maple tree in their front yard that catches any rays that might trickle through. While the smell nearly makes me gag, I am thankful for the dimness that might dull the bright red of my embarrassed, tear-blotched face. My brother and I are not united by our shame. With every step both to and from Bradley's house, I feel further from Jimmy than I have ever felt.

When we get to Daniel's house, and his mother realizes why we are there, she tells us that she appreciates what we are doing and that she will consider having Daniel do the same. As I apologize, Daniel looks at me — but in a way that seems like I am not even here. Like when my dad is angry, but not quite the same. Mr. Jensen has a very slight smile right at the top of his lips, and I realize, right in that moment, that both he and Daniel have the same, unseeing expressions, and I don't know how I know, but I

understand that I should be very afraid for Daniel. Mr. Jensen looks first over our heads — at nothing — and then at Daniel, again, just like he is seeing nothing.

I have no idea what Daniel's punishment will be. I know his dad gives harsh punishments — not because Daniel has ever told us, but because I have heard him crying, from my little spying spot outside the cellar doors. They must be bad because I have never seen him cry at any other time in my life. Mr. Jensen is a quiet person when he is outside, but I have also heard him yell at Daniel before. Still I know from my own punishments, it isn't the yelling that hurts.

We are allowed to leave our house for church Sunday morning, but otherwise we are grounded to our rooms, except for meals and chores. By Sunday afternoon I can no longer stand it. My dad is in the basement; my mom has gone to the store to pick up last minute back-to-school supplies. Jimmy is in his room with the door closed. Instead of the usual buzz in our house that I always think I need to escape from, today I need to be released from the silence. My parents' disappointment hangs heavy in the air. They believe that we are good kids, and that sometimes good kids do stupid stuff. They want to make sure we don't do it again, but they can't know what has been happening in that field. Jimmy acts as if we are being punished for the whole summer in the field. I know my parents still love me and will be back to normal soon. But I'm not so sure about Jimmy. His withdrawal from me has been abrupt and complete. He will no longer look at me when we are in the same room, and he will only stay in the same room with me as long as he is required.

As I tip-toe past Jimmy's bedroom door, I realize there is no reason to sneak. We might be grounded to our rooms, but since my dad is in the basement with his stereo playing, who will notice if I am not there?

I go through the dining room and out the back door, onto the patio and through the back yard. I walk across our driveway, making my way around the garage and into the alley. Even though my destination is the giant fir in the Jensens' yard, I can't take the direct route. I know our side gate squeaks, just like the creaky screen door on the side of our house, and I think my dad might be able to hear that from the basement. I notice the cellar doors are open as I cut through the Jensens' driveway. I walk silently across their patio, automatically weaving in and out of the wrought iron furniture. Mrs. Jensen went shopping with my mom, and I imagine that Daniel is stuck in his own room while Mr. Jensen works in his basement. My thoughts become focused on Kiki, her warm fur, and how it will feel under the palm of my hand. I want to wrap myself up in that feeling. As I slip under the prickly branches of the fir tree, the warmth and softness that is Kiki slips past my arm, and then my leg as the cat dashes out from under the tree, into the yard, and onto the wall.

My heart howls even as I reverse direction, the fir tree scraping and scratching as if it wants to hang onto me the way I want to hang onto Kiki. In spite of the cloudy sky, she has found a sliver of sun on the wall and soaks the orange out of the light while she licks her paws, pretending to clean her whiskers. She is waiting for me, I know, to sit by her and scratch the exact right place behind her ear. She wants my touch as much as I want to give it, but she won't ask for it, will even bristle, right up until the purr breaks

free. I approach slowly, knowing not to rush in, but she takes off anyway. Up the hill we go, dodging tomato stakes and cucumber vines, through the rhubarb patch; Cocoa and her slobbery muzzle are chained up near the Pedersens' house, but her presence doesn't slow down the cat. I chase her through the rest of the vegetable garden, not caring about the mess we leave behind. Through the crushed limestone of the Pedersens' driveway, through a pile of mulch, and back down the incline into the Jensens' driveway. Kiki stops outside the cellar doors as if waiting for me to catch up, so it's clear where I must venture next if I really want to lay down by her.

And down she goes, plunging into the depths of that basement.

VI

I should be clear here: it's not like I've never been in the Jensens' basement. For many weeks, the kittens lived down there. It is where they were born. But they were in the other room — the laundry room at the bottom of the stairs that come down from the kitchen. The Jensens' house is big, and so is their basement. There are several rooms that are only Mr. Jensen's domain. I may have peeked into them when I was in the laundry room tending the kittens, but they were murky-seeming, and one was even tucked back on the other side of the furnace. Before now, I never had reason to push into that space where I didn't belong.

Even as I descend those steps, I know it isn't my place. Still, I don't see or hear Mr. Jensen. In fact, as I listen for the scurrying sounds of cat feet on cement, I hear the

creaking of the floor overhead, where I picture Mr. Jensen having a snack and reading over his project plans the way my dad does. I move deeper into the basement, and see Kiki go into what I think is a storeroom for older furniture. She slips under a table, and pushes behind an old couch. I have come this far — a little darkness and dirt is not going to stop me now. I get down on all fours and, ducking my head, I follow her through a few strands of cobweb. I realize the couch is not all the way up against the wall, and there is room for both the cat and me behind and partly under the couch. The cardboard boxes that line the walls of the room dull the sounds beyond. The only light is coming in through the doorway. I can barely see Kiki, but my hand knows the top of her head better than my own. I rearrange myself, my body naturally curling around hers. Her warmth calms my mind, seeps into my flesh, and I can feel her purring in my own neck.

I wake up still wrapped around Kiki, the sound of gagging and coughing penetrating my consciousness. It's not as dark now; there is a light on in this room, and the door is closed. From where my head rests on the floor, I see men's work boots facing away from the couch and a boy's legs kneeling between them. There is scuffling and crying, the couch creaks, the feet disappear. I think I hear Mr. Jensen taking off his belt. I wait for the sound of the beating that I am sure is coming, and I squeeze my eyes and clench my teeth to steel myself against it. But it doesn't happen. Instead, I hear grunting, breath whooshing out and wheezing in. The couch shifts, a boy whimpers, cries deep down in his throat, in his chest. I don't understand, and I don't want to. The warmth in the room is gone. It is cold and hot all at once. The cement floor beneath me is damp,

and my chilled fingers grip the cat's fur tightly. She complains with an irritated mewl, and wriggles out of my hold. The creaking of the couch stops, and I hear a "What the hell?!" and a work boot comes back into view. A belt buckle jingles and the boy's feet are on the floor. He is pulling up his pants, but he hasn't gotten a beating yet, and I can't quite understand why. The cat darts out between the work boots and the boys feet and I hear Daniel's voice saying, "C'mere girl, it's okay." His voice is scratchy from crying and it doesn't sound like it's okay. He runs his hand over the cat's head, and opens the door for the cat to go out. He goes out with the cat. Once his feet reach the outer room they break into a run and they pound up the stairs and leave through the cellar doors.

Mr. Jensen's breathing is heavy and loud and I am glad. I think I might choke or cough or cry, and I just want to keep my breathing quiet and go back to sleep and wake up in my own room where I belong. Mr. Jensen's breath gets faster and then rushes out all at once, and he is still for a long time. Then Mrs. Jensen calls in through the cellar doors. It's unclear what she says, but Mr. Jensen jumps up, his belt jangling. He shuffles around and walks out of the room, turning out the light as he leaves.

I can't think of anything except that my own mother must be home too. In my own house. In my own driveway. With her own shopping. With my own baby brother. And my big brother is in my house. And he will come out to help her carry the shopping in. And I am supposed to be in my room. And I have to leave this basement before they close the cellar doors and put that giant lock back on them.

So, I move for the first time in what I believe must be many hours. I crawl out from behind the couch, demanding that my legs move even though they seem not even

connected to the rest of me. I stay small, like the cat. I creep along the wall outside the storage room. I listen while Mr. and Mrs. Jensen carry bags from the car into the house. I wait until I hear the screen door slam and their voices above me, and then I bolt up the steps and out the cellar doors. I pass the car and the open trunk and keep running. I stop when I get behind my own garage. As I wait for my own car to be unloaded, I look around. Daniel is hiding across the alley in the Blantons' driveway, in the space between the Blantons' car and their garage.

He looks directly at me. It's clear that he has watched me come out of his cellar doors. He knows that I was down there.

I hear the trunk of our car slam, and a few seconds later the back door closes. Our families are inside putting away groceries and school supplies. I turn to take off around my own garage, to face the punishment that is surely waiting for me. But my feet don't work right; they get tangled up with themselves, and I topple onto the alley's half-gravel half-asphalt surface. And then he is on me. On my back, pounding my shoulders with his fists, pulling my hair, pushing my face into the gravel. He pulls my arm, twists me over, so he can pound my chest, my face, over and over. Finally, I get an arm free and I fight back: push and scratch and kick. I use my hands, my elbow, my feet, my knees. He pushes my chin, grinds my head into the ground. I somehow get a hold of his hand with my teeth, and something in his face changes. He suddenly sees me. It is like my teeth in his hand turned the light switch inside of him back to "on." He gets off of me, and runs up the alley and out of sight.

I crawl on the asphalt around the side of the garage to the open garage door; the car is not inside yet. I don't like our garage. My dad bought a small cement mixer when he poured our new sidewalk and driveway, and in the dim light it looks like a small orange dinosaur in the corner. It always scares me a little, but somehow, today, it reminds me of the "Snort!" from the *Are You My Mother?* book on our shelf in the playroom. The "Snort!" saves the baby bird in that book. I stumble into the garage, and crouch down behind the cement mixer in the corner.

I still don't remember how my mother found me, or when. I do remember that I didn't start school right away that year. I also remember my brother coming home from school one day looking like he, too, had been in a fight. When they first asked what happened to me, they accepted when I wouldn't answer. Still, Jimmy knew somehow that it was Daniel.

My mother will hardly let me out of her sight now. She sees the results of what has happened to me, and I think she is tortured by not knowing exactly what that is. She must picture the punching and the pounding, and when she cleans me up after the attack, I can see her tears drip past my own face as leans over me to pull the gravel out of my cheek with the tweezers. When my father tries to take the tweezers out of her quivering hands, she jerks away from him and steadies herself. I finally recognize that part of the reason that she cries so much is because I don't. At some point during the time that Daniel was pounding me, it stopped hurting. I only bit him because I knew that he was

stuck, like the needle on a vinyl record that can't get past the scratch in the recording. I could see that he couldn't stop.

I stay in bed for a lot of days, just listening. My mother plays with baby Charlie in the playroom, while watching me in my bed. She brings lunch upstairs and we eat chicken soup out of a mug while Charlie plays in his playpen, and she feeds him on a blanket on the playroom floor. She puts a towel on my chest and lap, because I dribble. My lips are swollen and don't work so well, but she lets me use a straw as I get better.

My dad wants to ask me questions about what happened, but my mom won't let him until I can move my lips. I hear them arguing about it when they think we are all asleep. My mom says something about the police, but my dad says: "You don't call the police on your neighbors."

"It might have been someone else. Someone not from the neighborhood." She replies.

"We both know who did this." He says.

My mom thinks it is my dad's fault because he was supposed to be watching me, but they never really "watch" us like that. We are old enough to follow directions. No, if it is anyone's fault, it is mine. Yes, Daniel is the one who hit me, but I should not have let him do those things to me in the field. It made him believe that I love him, like I love Jimmy. And now he has no one because he and Jimmy are not friends anymore either. He is hurt and Jimmy is hurt, and it is only right that I am hurt too.

When my parents finally sit down with me to talk to me about what happened, I tell them that when I went outside that day, I accidentally kicked my ball out of the yard and into the alley. “There was this big boy that I don’t know riding his bike down the hill, fast.” I speak slowly and carefully like I have practiced in my head, and I watch them through my swollen eyes. “My ball hit his bike, and it made him lose his balance. I ran out to get my ball, and he got up and was yelling at me because I made him fall off his bike. And then he started hitting me. Daniel must have heard us, and came out to help me. The boy was bigger than both of us, and he pushed me down and stood on top of me pushing my face in the road while he hit Daniel.” I tell them that I’m really sorry for causing all this trouble. And by now I am crying because I really am sorry. I tell them that Daniel got hurt too much already, and that they shouldn’t say anything to Daniel’s parents because then he might get into trouble for being outside too. Even if the only reason he was out there was to help me. “Sometimes Daniel’s dad just won’t hear that Daniel was being good.” I say.

They don’t seem like they believe me but they don’t ask me any more questions. My mom just scoops me up, rocks me and says things like, “Shush now.” She tells me not to worry, that it is all over, and that everything will be okay now. But I think about Daniel, and his dad, and the basement, and I know she is wrong.

* * *

My mom and dad continue to talk about things when they think I can't hear. Even if I can't make out everything they say, I can tell that they don't agree. Words like "shame" and "forgive" and "responsibility" float up through the heat vents when they are working in the basement.

She takes me to the doctor after I am mostly healed and my bruises are gone. It is my regular fall check-up, which she had to re-schedule because "something came up," and she only tells the doctor that I was in a scuffle with a kid who was visiting our neighborhood, and that she is pretty sure that he didn't hit me in the stomach, but she would appreciate him checking to make sure that everything is fine. He lifts my arms up and down, turns my head back and forth and pauses to have a look at my cheek.

"She fell off her bike, too." My mom says. The doctor pushes on my belly, and then listens to my belly and my chest and my back. He has smiley face balls in his office that he gives you to hold onto when he gives you a shot. He bounces one off my stomach.

"Kids are practically made of rubber," he says. "They bend and bounce, and it's actually pretty hard to break them."

VII

My mom walks us to school when it is my first day back. Baby Charlie rides along in the stroller and hugs a bag that holds the school supplies that won't fit in my backpack. I am good at school, so the only work I had to do at home was to read some

books, practice some flash cards with my mom, and write some sentences about my summer. I wrote about fishing with my family and sleeping in the tent. I described the design on the sleeping bag, which has three different colors of pink, two of purple, two of green, a yellow and a gold. The design looks like one big flower, only at the center of the flower's petals is a smaller flower, and at the center of that flower is an even smaller flower, and the flowers in the middle get tinier and tinier until you can't even tell they are flowers anymore. My teacher makes a smiley face in the top corner of the page in bright red pen and writes under it "Neat!" I wish she had written in green instead of red. When I get home I rip the off corner with her writing on it, and put the paper into my "favorite papers notebook." I rip the red smiley face and my teacher's perfect letters into teeny, tiny shreds of paper, smaller than confetti before I throw them into my trash can.

That whole first week at school, my mom walks us to school, and meets us afterwards next to the playground. She lets us play for ten minutes before she walks home with us. In the following weeks, after a morning when Baby Charlie won't stop crying, she begins to let me walk to and from school with only Jimmy to watch me. We never know when she might show up, though, so we always walk our regular route home if she's not there to pick us up.

Since I took so long coming back to school, my best friend found a new best friend her own age that she walks to school with. I think sometime I'll play with her again, but I'm not sure when that will be. Sometimes I see Daniel at school, but I never see him talking to anyone. He and Jimmy don't play together anymore — I never even

see them look at each other. Really, Daniel seems more and more like his dad now. He only looks through people now, and I worry that he can't really see me at all anymore.

There is a day, finally, when my mom is not home after school. She leaves us a note, saying that Mrs. Pedersen is home if we need anything. I sit outside at the picnic table while Jimmy climbs on the monkey bars that are part of our new swing set. Then he goes inside for his snack and his comic book. Our back door closes about the same time that Daniel's side door opens. He steps outside, letting the screen door slam behind him. He doesn't even look my way. He sits in a wrought iron chair under the oak tree and puts his head down on the table. I get up and walk toward him, then toward the gate. It creaks as I open it, but he doesn't move.

I realize that I haven't said anything to Daniel since that day all those weeks ago, and I don't know if I have any words for him now. But I need to see him, up close, today. I need to see the sun on his face, shining on his hair, lighting up his ice-blue eyes. I touch him on the shoulder. Just a tiny touch with the tips of my fingers. I imagine squeezing his shoulder with my hand, feeling the heat and the warmth of his shirt and his muscle under my whole hand, but I don't actually do it. He looks up, and see that he is not warm at all. I realize that I shouldn't have touched him, and I back up a little, but I don't want to be afraid. I think about that day in the field when I peed in the washing machine and bossed him around.

I can't remember him being at school today, and I wonder if he has been home all day by himself while his mom was at work. His dad's car is not out back, but he usually

gets home from work just after we get home from school, and I'm thinking his car will pull up any minute. I can't read Daniel's mind, but I feel certain that he is thinking the same thing.

"I want to show you something." I say to him. I don't know when this idea has come into my head, but now it is here, and I need to see it through. I turn to walk toward his front yard, and his body shifts in his chair. I pause at the edge of the grass to look back, so he knows I am waiting for him to follow. He gets up, even though his face is blank and doesn't even look curious. I turn and keep walking, crossing the grass in a diagonal. My body is on a direct path for the small space between the wall and the fir tree. When I arrive, I turn again, waiting for him to get close before I pull the branches back, duck down, and slip between the prickles.

* * *

All the days that I was stuck inside in my bed, I imagined sitting under the fir tree. I thought about smelling the bed of brown needles, and feeling the prickles on my face when I pushed my way through my make-shift doorway. I imagined Kiki waiting for me in the quiet shadows. But she is not here now, and I know I can't stay here, today or really ever come again now that I have shown this place to Daniel. It is too close under here for the two of us. Once he is all the way in, I slip back out, and return to my own back yard where I climb onto the swing and wait for Jimmy.

I am not really allowed to be alone anymore, and after seeing Daniel again, I realize that I don't want to be. When my mom and dad are not around, it is now Jimmy's

responsibility to look after me. He does have other friends he plays with at school and in the neighborhood, but whenever my mom calls him, he comes in quickly and does what she asks. When he comes out of the house today, he sees where I am, then finds a chair and sits down to read.

Jimmy doesn't complain about the extra responsibility. He watches me carefully. He never teases me now about how slow I ride my bike up the hill or what shows I watch on T.V. He hardly even talks to me now and he never touches me. One week-end we go to visit our grandparents in Milwaukee. We have to sleep in our aunt's old room, in her double bed. I bring my flashlight, hoping we will read or play games, or draw on each others' backs like we did last summer. But my mom leaves the lamp on, and tells us we can read as long we want tonight. Jimmy never even looks my way; he just reads his book until he falls asleep, and then I get out of bed to walk across the room and turn off the lamp.

The Truth about Rockford

Part I — Ellen

Picture her: a small girl in a crisply ironed pinafore, her brown, dutch-boy hair barely covering her ears. She waits for the city bus to pick her up after school. Her hazel-green eyes see the world with a clarity that the children around her, mostly her brothers and sisters, can't even imagine.

In 1951, Ellen Louisa Hahn turns six. Already she's had two ear surgeries after complications from the measles left her nearly deaf at three. Still, she begins school in first grade. There is no kindergarten. Her eyes make it possible for her to function in the world. She learns to read long before she starts school, partly because she's not distracted by all of the things that take her siblings away from their books.

The sharpness of Ellen's sight is something her myopic mother depends on to read signs in the distance. One day, Ellen and her mother (Grandma Lottie, we call her) are catty-corner from the store when a man runs out of the store, jumps in his car, and drives away. At first, they don't realize what's going on, but when Mr. Fischhoff, the owner, comes running out of the store yelling, they cross over to the entrance. Lottie asks Ellen to give Mr. Fischhoff the license plate number for the car that just drove off. Lottie expects that Ellen will know the number, and she does. It's just how it is. Later, Mr. Fischhoff passes the number on to the police.

Ellen waits on the bench outside the store while Lottie does her shopping. The police stop Lottie as she leaves the store. They have discovered the source of Mr.

Fischhoff's information, and apparently, they are skeptical. They begin to question Lottie. Where were you standing when the theft took place? How could the girl have seen the license plate from that far away? Did she write the number down somewhere? How did she remember it? They don't understand that these are the things my mother does to compensate for those things she cannot do.

Ellen doesn't like those policemen, but it isn't because she's offended that they don't believe her. She doesn't even realize that part—she can't hear what they're saying. What she does realize, though, is that they aren't being nice to her mother. She gets up to stand closer to her mother. When she can't stand the agitation anymore — the policemen's, her mother's, her own — she blurts out the license plate of the police car.

"Little 'M,' little 'P' 587." Everyone turns.

"What?" One of the policeman looks at her like she's crazy.

"The license plate on your car," she points across the street and down the block.

"Little 'M,' little 'P' 587." The plate on the police car is not even visible from where they stand.

"What do you mean, young lady?" The confused policeman looks at Lottie for help.

"She must have seen it when you pulled up." Lottie turns to her daughter for confirmation. "Ellie?" Ellen nods, backing up whatever it is that Lottie chooses to say.

"But that was at least twenty minutes ago!" The man is confounded. And probably, he's confounded all over again when the license plate number Ellie gave to Mr. Fischhoff leads them to the man who is guilty of a series of corner store robberies.

What my mother didn't know, and maybe still doesn't, is that "Little 'M,' little 'P'" stands for "Municipal Police."

* * *

In spite of her acute visual perception, or maybe because of it, my mother was more of an inward child, spending hours rocking in her miniature rocking chair, singing to herself. She knew tunes, remembered them from when her mother rocked her as a baby, and would substitute new words for forgotten ones, or would sometimes just leave the words out altogether, letting the vibrations of the melody move through her head. When Grandma Birdie visited from Oshkosh, she found it strange that such a visual child wouldn't rather color or draw. Birdie would ask her why she spent so much time rocking and singing. Ellie, of course, didn't know why really, only that she liked it, took comfort from it. This was likely the one way she could really hear. Because her own voice came from inside her head, she could feel the vibrations of that sound, even the pitch levels, in the bones of her face. It was her way of keeping contact with her hearing when everyone else seemed aurally distant.

My mother also had an incredible sense of smell, which proved altogether too acute for life in Rockford. It let her know what was for dinner when she missed out on the conversation, but otherwise there was no particular benefit from this increased sensitivity. There was nothing good to smell in Rockford. In her eyes it was a city of dirty streets, and filthy, buses billowing black smoke. They choked her with exhaust

when she was on the street and stifled her with the stench of dozens of working class laborers when she was trapped on the bus. She hated that her bus stopped at the lumberyard on the way home from her school, but she thought the workers must hate smelling that way worse than she hated smelling them. She would swallow the nausea and try to find something green to focus on out the window as she rode home.

She tried to give people the benefit of the doubt, but the people in Rockford taught her that they didn't deserve the benefit of the doubt. Once, while waiting with her older brothers and sisters at the bus stop after school, my mother dropped her bus fare. It was the only nickel she had, none of her brothers or sisters had any extra — they were given out in the morning, one to get to school, one to get home — a five mile walk without it. My mother, a six-year-old child at the time, knew she needed that nickel and frantically chased after it as it rolled down the sidewalk. Just as she reached to pick it up, an enormous white shoe came down upon it. The large black leg growing out of the shoe was as big around as Ellen's own arms and legs all put together. The owner of the leg, a gigantic black woman from Ellen's perspective, wore a simple cotton dress and clutched a purse securely in hands held in front of her bosom. A kerchief covered her hair and was tied snugly between double black chins. The woman's face remained averted even as Ellen excitedly explained to the woman that her foot was on Ellen's nickel. Ellen was astounded when the face didn't turn toward her but inched further in the other direction. She tugged the woman's dress, and pleaded for her to move.

The bus pulled up to the stop, but the woman didn't budge. Pushing and pounding the woman's knee, Ellen looked up to see her siblings joining the line to get on

the bus, her eldest sister calling for her. Finally, in her desperation, Ellen leaned down and bit the woman's knee. The woman, too shocked to remain still, jumped back, exposing the nickel. Snatching it up, Ellen dashed for the bus, ran up the steps, and deposited the nickel. She took an empty seat in the front of the bus, nowhere near the rest of her family, her eyes streaming and heart beating frantically.

As she sat down in her seat, it struck her all at once: They weren't going to wait. Someone probably would have been sent back after her, when her mother finally got home from work, but no one was going to choose to wait for on their own.

My mother became a person who took care of herself, and resented others who didn't. "Behavior is a choice." Grandma Lottie would say. "We might be poor, but there's no excuse for being dirty." As poor as they were, they had a place to live... and running water. My mother learned to work hard to get the things she wanted. She learned to look down on people that had less than she did — they obviously didn't work hard enough. Her brothers and sisters were doing their damndest to make their own way, and any extra responsibility was a burden. Of course they would leave her behind.

In spite of having lived in five different states, courtesy of my father's railroad career, my mother had known only two black people personally in her entire life. One was a fellow employee at Uni-Vac, who, my mom believed, "got away with murder" on a regular basis because the company couldn't fire her. The other was an endearing man named John Cook, who was the head chef on the railroad business car. He and my father became friends when my dad was a clerk for the Vice President of Operations and

traveled with him. John and my dad shared break times, and would sit out on the back of the train smoking and talking about their families. When my dad became a company man, and ran the meetings on the business car himself, he still made a point to take time during his trips to visit with John. Whenever John was in town, my dad brought him home for dinner. My mom thought he was delightful, and she always asked him questions about his recipes. She was always a little nervous when he came because, she said, she felt uncomfortable serving her humble cooking to a *chef*. However, John was as gracious as any of the “big whigs” my dad brought home with him, and always had time to talk with us children. He didn’t mind when my brothers asked him about his curly hair or his flat nose, and he happily held out his arm for me to touch when I asked him if his skin was as smooth as it looked.

By the time the Million Man March was led by Louis Farrakhan in October 1995, my mother could count her interactions with African Americans on one hand. And somehow, when the family was together at Christmas that winter and the subject of the March came up, the story of the nickel was the story that she thought to tell.

* * *

The relationship that Ellen develops with her mother comes, at least in part, from the threat of loss. Even her baby brother doesn’t get the special attention that Ellie does due to her illness. After the first two ear surgeries, the family has run out of money for treatment. But Ellie ends up in the hospital several times anyway due to massive

infections in her middle ears, and her mom takes off work to stay in the hospital with her. The infections, in turn, rupture her ear drums and begin to break down the bones that make up the middle ear. Lottie makes a plastic pillow cover out of an old table cloth and puts Ellen's pillowcase over it, so she won't have to wash the pus out of the pillow every morning. They can't possibly afford to throw the pillow away. She takes Ellie to the clinic every week to have penicillin shots. They know the family well at the clinic anyway because of her father's tuberculosis.

On days that Ellie stays home sick from school, she takes care of her baby brother while her mom takes her dad to the clinic. Eventually, the doctor at the clinic pressures the family to admit Arthur sanatorium full-time, and his limited income dries up completely. Ellie's older siblings start working part-time to contribute to the household income. Two of her siblings go to live with their grandmother in Oshkosh, to take the load off the family. Her mom works two jobs, and enrolls her youngest son into school a year early. Ellie looks after her younger brother after school. She is only seven when her father is first admitted to the sanatorium. In 1952, no one checks to see if children are left at home alone.

Through all of this, Ellie lives in a muffled world. I know from other stories that it is not until after she marries my father, and he takes her to Mayo Clinic to have the bones in her ears rebuilt, that she regains at least some of her hearing. She never heard the anger and resentment that colored the lives of her siblings. And yet, if she was protected from the worst by her ability to disconnect, then what makes Rockford the pit that exists in her memory?

* * * *

The rest of my mom's siblings grew up to lead messy adult lives. Several were financial successes at some point, only to fall apart in times of crisis. All, except for my mom, have abused some substance, generally alcohol, for extended periods of time. None, again with the exception of my mom, have been able to maintain long term relationships. They all divorced at least once, or were estranged from their spouses. Not one of them had an easy go of it. One lost a child in a car accident, one a husband and a son to cancer. One married a man who moved her out to the country, beat her up, and locked her in the house while he went away on business trips. One is a Vietnam Vet. None of them have even tried to gloss over the effects of their struggles. "It is what it is" has become the most common saying when referring to that side of the family. At various times they have all looked to my mom and dad's relationship as an ideal to reach for, or possibly to resent. It's an irony that baby Ellie became a role model for her older siblings.

* * *

My desire to visit Rockford on my own comes from my desire to understand my mother on a deeper level. She has taught all of her children to "love thy neighbor" and to care for the poor. Maybe some of these values have been taught to her by my father, but

sometimes she tells stories that are profoundly empathic, and other times she seems to lack any sympathy for the common man. I admire her and am angry with her; I *am* her and then *not* her at the same time.

When I finally make the trip to Rockford, my initial response is shock at its charm. I'm here without telling my mother I am coming, and I can't help but worry about how she will feel when she finds out. She knows that I am on my way to Madison for a conference at the University. She doesn't know that the the main motivation for me to accept the opportunity to join the conference is because I can have the opportunity to travel through Rockford.

I know she won't want to see the photos of my trip: I imagine her face closing as she flips through them, the retraction that will happen inside of her that I will feel inside of myself. It is part of why I am compelled to be here, to understand why the woman who defines connection in my life, withdraws completely when even this name arises.

I drive into the city and follow first one block, then another, up and down, searching for offense. The streets are clean, the buildings almost sparkle. There are areas of new construction, as well as obviously re-habbed buildings. I match the limestone building that once housed the Manufacturer's National Bank before the stock market crash and the run on the banks leading up to the Great Depression. I read that the building was purchased by the city back in 1937 for it's new city hall, and has been the focus of many building and expansion projects over the decades. I drive further down State Street toward the Rock River, for which the city was eventually named. I park and

walk down to the river. I cross the bridge and walk up-river to Beattie Park. It is green and inviting. I sit on a bench, wanting to just absorb the surroundings. Something is wrong. I can't feel the anger, the disease, the unhappiness.

Walking back up to State Street, I imagine a black and white photograph I have seen of John F. Kennedy driving down State Street during his 1960 campaign. It shows him riding through town on the back of a white convertible, passing the bank and the hardware store, passing people hanging out by their cars. This picture would have been taken within a decade of when my mother moved away. The Rockford Register Star building, the tallest buildings in the photo, looks almost the same, and I navigate around it, looking for other similarities. Nothing distressing hides in the alleyways. Between the city buildings the worst I find are dumpsters, puddles, and a few scavenging birds.

As I drive out of the downtown area, toward the address that I managed to wheedle out of my aunt, I remember the story about the nickel. I leave behind the area of the city that has "100 trees on every block" as advertised in the city literature, and enter the part of town that my mom has only ever referred to as "the projects." There are no parks on this side of town; many sections do not even have sidewalks or curbs. I find the apartment building that was my mom's growing up. I don't know why, but I expected the buildings to be made of brick. Instead, the building that my mom lived in has faded blue siding. I expect that it was not blue when my mom lived here, since blue remains her favorite color. There are four flats to each one-story building, three buildings to a grouping, and each grouping is arranged in a U-shape around a center yard. The yard that

adjoins my mom's building is littered with broken down bicycles and pieces of sun-bleached plastic toys. The open section of the U faces the street, so people can park on the street and walk into the yard. Several cars are pulled into a cut out section, so they don't have to parallel park. As I get out of my car and walk over, I realize those spaces aren't paved, just worn down and packed from use.

Each building has two doors that open onto the street on the front side of the building, and two doors that open out to the courtyard, in the back. The windows have aluminum frames and mismatched awnings with patches of what I think are mold. Or maybe they are bits of asphalt washing down from the peeling roof shingles. A tiny covered porch shelters each door and the cement steps leading up to it. I picture my mother sitting in her rocking chair on her porch while her siblings play in the yard. Was it just a yard of dirt back then too? It is June now, around eighty degrees. It's been a moist spring for the midwest, and on the yard's edges, where dirt meets gravel, remnants of the spring weeds struggle to rise up.

* * *

Back in my own home on the outskirts of St. Louis, I decide to take my photos of Rockford the next time I visit my mom. Looking through the stack, I see only the contrast of the green city to the blighted neighborhood that once belonged to my mother. The contrast itself could account for her attitude toward her time there. And yet, she

lived in a poor neighborhood in La Crosse, in a tiny flat with her family, and she doesn't harbor the same resentment toward that town.

Part II — Stuart & Rebecca

Before I have any further opportunity to sort through my ideas and make a real plan, my mother calls me to let me know that my Uncle Stuart, her oldest brother, has died of a heart attack. I leave almost immediately to drive north to stay with her in Peoria, Illinois until we need to leave for the wake in Rockford. Stuart himself moved around the midwest, only to land back in Rockford. My own trip to Rockford weighs on me as I realize my own failure to connect with my uncle while I was in town two before robbed me of one last visit with him. My Rockford photos are in a pocket in my suitcase, but I can't imagine talking about them during this trip. My mom is one of seven children, and Stuart is the first to die.

The drive to Rockford from Peoria is only three hours. My mother's subdued mood is not unexpected. I imagine she is not only thinking about Stuart, but about returning to Rockford. In all the years Stuart has lived there, we haven't ever visited his house. Most often we all meet up in La Crosse, but he has visited my parents various houses over the years. I have been studying the map to locate his small suburban town in reference to the other places I visited in Rockford recently.

My father is handling a train wreck on the other side of the state, and since strikes are not unheard of following a derailment which has resulted in the deaths of several men, there's no way for him to get away. She apologizes again for making me come. "It's summer, I'm off school, it's not a hassle." I tell her, again. "I would have come anyway." He was one of my favorite uncles.

During the drive, my mom begins to ruminate on the circumstances we will be faced with once we arrive at Stu's. Her oldest sister, Rebecca, is already in Rockford helping Cindy, Stuart's wife, manage. Stu was not even sixty and had not been particularly unhealthy, so his death is a shock to everyone. My mom has already given me this information twice, once on the phone when she called me with the news, once when I arrived at her house. She needs to need to say it again, so I go with it. She never brings up the fact that we are on the road to her least favorite city, so I avoid it as well. Instead, we discuss the family members she expects to be there, and eventually we loop back around to to talk about Stuart and his family.

"Wow. I haven't seen them in forever. Stu is, what, six years older than you?"

"Was."

"What?"

"He *was* six years older than me. Almost seven. Now, I will pass him up." I glance over at her, then back at the road. Her own concentration on the road is intense.

"Yes. Right." I think she needs to keep talking. Whatever is racing around in her head is oozing out through her pores. "Wow. Almost sixty. Imagine having an eleven year old at this point in your life."

Stuart technically had ten children. Three from his first marriage, four from his second marriage (three of those were his wife's kids whom he adopted), and three from his marriage to Cindy (he also adopted her son). So, six biological children, four adopted children.

His first wife left him and disappeared with his two daughters, while pregnant with his son, whom Stuart didn't even know about until the boy's sixteenth birthday. His second wife died of a brain embolism while less than seven months pregnant with their baby. The doctors kept her alive in a vegetative state until the baby could be safely born by C-section. His third wife, Cindy, he met in hospital in the neonatal intensive care unit. They bonded while caring for their premature sons. She was a single mother with no way to find employment; he was widowed man with a job and no one to look after his children.

Even though we arrive at the funeral home hours before the wake is to begin, we still park a block away. Stuart's children, brothers, and sisters fill up the inner room near the coffin. There's no way to get all of the family into the room that says "Family Only" on the door. On top of this, I discover that Stu had coached little league baseball for nearly two decades in this small suburb of Rockford. His youngest boys, eleven and twelve, are on his current team. By the time we get the photo boards assembled and set out food in the room for the family, we still have over an hour to go before it's time to open the doors to friends. When I walk out into the hallway to use the restroom, the line

of people wraps its way around the entire inside of the building, up one hallway and down another. Outside, it extends partway down the block. With Cindy's permission, they open the visitation an hour early. The line never seems to go down, and no one leaves. They open a sliding door between our viewing room and the next, and they also open the chapel for additional seating. It feels like everyone in town is here.

In the restaurant, after the wake, it occurs to me that Stuart's siblings don't really present themselves as a group who has just lost a brother. I hope that the owners of the restaurant weren't at the wake earlier. "Mattie! Come take our picture." My Aunt Clare holds out a camera. I feel strange taking a picture of them without Stu. I look at my cousin, and she just shrugs.

The hilarity continues as the dinner gathering turns into a bar gathering. We close the bar at 11:30, so that proprietor can lock up and rest before the funeral in the morning. He knew Stuart well, and joined our gathering. Rebecca booked a block of rooms at a modest hotel, and some of us gather in the deserted indoor swimming pool area to continue talking. Even as others drift off to their rooms, my mom, Aunt Rebecca and I talk and smoke until the sun comes up.

I'm not aware of purposely steering the conversation that way, but I suddenly realize Rebecca is telling me about Rockford. She says living in Rockford was so hard because the Hahns were essentially in hiding. Grandpa Arthur had helped Grandma Lottie escape her first husband. Rebecca, Stuart, Clare, and Mel are all children of

Lottie's first husband. My own response to this information is confused. I had no idea, yet, I am somehow not completely surprised by the revelation.

"He was a violent asshole of the first degree." Rebecca says this like a woman who long ago accepted this part of her history. "Sometimes parents hit their kids. Beat them even. It happens. I'm not saying none of us never deserved a smack. But he would get into these rages. We learned to get out of his way. Mom would get in his way on purpose. But one day, one day... Mom ran up to the corner store, to pick up beans for her casserole. Green beans, she said. Green beans for the casserole, beer for Him. She didn't want me to walk up there by myself, and both Clare and Mel were sleeping. So, she left me to mind them, and took Stu with her. It was the year that I started school, and I was big enough to walk to school by myself, but she wouldn't let me go to the store and buy beer. So, I stayed home with the babies."

I can see how tired Rebecca is. It's been an emotional day, and she has suffered a loss. But if she wants to talk, even babble a little, I want to listen. I *need* to listen. My mom dozes in her chair, and I know I should probably take her to bed, but here are the answers that I have waited for. The only lights on in the room are the pool lights, and the darkness of the night outside the the big windows cushion us from the rest of the world.

"She left me with the babies, and he came home while she was gone." Rebecca continues, but her voice comes from far away. "He was already angry when he walked in. He must have been early because Mom always had dinner ready to serve when he got home, so he must have come home early for some reason." Rebecca pauses, lights another cigarette automatically. Her mind is in that house now, with her father.

“Mom was careful to make sure she met his expectations. She never gave him a reason to get angry.” She blows the smoke out through her nose in a big sigh, and flicks the ashes off the end of her cigarette. Rebecca has always had immaculate nails, naturally long and well manicured. With the cigarette between her fingers, she uses her thumb to tilt the cigarette up and down, and draws her nail across the end of the filter.

“He was already mad, and Stuart had left a toy car by the door.” She came out of her reverie and looked at me. “It’s not like we had a lot of toys. Not like nowadays, where kids have so many toys they don’t even know what to do with them after a while.” I just shake my head in mock disgust at all these toys kids have.

“He picked up the car and threw it across the room, yelling for Stuart. In the bedroom Clare started crying, so I went to help her out of bed. She must have been about two at the time. So beautiful with all that golden hair.” She closes her eyes and takes a long drag on the cigarette. I imagine the glow from the head of a golden-haired two-year-old.

“Of course, he’s pissed at Stu. ‘Where is he?!’ He yelled. ‘Stuart, get your ass out here!’ ‘He went to the store with mom.’ I told him. I was rubbing Clare’s hand, and then her arm, so she wouldn’t cry. I would pet her like a cat, and she would calm down. She and I stood in the doorway of our bedroom watching him. He went into the kitchen, I remember. I heard the fridge open. By this time the baby was awake, and I was afraid he would start fussing and make Him angry again.” I realize at this point that I don’t even know the name of Rebecca’s real father. I didn’t know she had a father other than

Grandpa Arthur until tonight. She won't say his name, though, and won't call him 'dad' but only 'Him' and she keeps calling Uncle Mel 'the baby.'

"I sat Clare down on the bedroom floor with her blanket and climbed onto a stool to get the baby out of the crib. I was shushing the baby, and had one eye on the doorway between the living room and the kitchen. I thought about closing the bedroom door, but I didn't want to make Him angrier, and He preferred it when I did what He told me to do, but nothing else." Rebecca snorts a little. She sets her cigarette in the ashtray where it slowly burns away to ash.

"He yelled for me to come to the kitchen, and I was afraid if I put the baby down, he would cry, so I brought him along. He couldn't find a beer, and he wanted to know why dinner wasn't on the table. I just said, 'It's not dinnertime yet.'" Rebecca doesn't even blink, but I actually flinch for her when she adds, "He yelled, 'It's dinnertime when I say it's dinnertime!'" and he reached out and back-handed me across the face and knocked me down. I tried not to land on the baby, but he was crying furiously anyway. I knelt over him and patted him to shush him, and the blood dripped out of my mouth onto his cotton gown. I knew how to take care of him, even knew how to change a diaper already, but He pushed me down and wouldn't let me. He would push me onto the floor, and I would just get back up and go to the baby. And Clare was crying in the other room, and every time I got up off the floor and moved to the baby, He would push me down again. And finally He yelled, 'Just leave that goddamn baby alone!' and He picked up the baby, and He hurled it across the room. The baby bounced off the wall, and Clare was screaming... and then Mom was standing in the doorway with Stuart behind her. She

was scared, but she was angry, the way she would get sometimes, like she saved it all up and it came out in a great rush. She pulled Stuart in behind her, moving toward the baby. Once she was between us and Him, she took a deep breath, pulled her arms in and heaved that entire bag of groceries at Him. Cans of green beans and bottles of beer flew across the room. I couldn't believe she did it; I didn't know what he might do in response, so I leaned over the baby on the floor to protect him. But it was like all of his energy had been used up by throwing that baby across the room. He fished an unbroken beer bottle out of the mess on the floor and walked out the door. And that was the last time I ever saw Him." She reaches over and pulls another cigarette out of her pack.

"And He never came back?" I ask.

"Oh, I'm sure he came back. But we weren't there. We left La Crosse that night. Mom had been trying to save some money, taking in laundry and ironing, so we could leave, but even though she wasn't ready yet, she knew we couldn't stay there anymore. She took us to Arthur. He hid us, and got us out of town. He didn't live with us at first, but eventually he did.

"He was the only dad Clare and Mel ever knew, and sometimes they didn't like him. They realized while we were in Rockford that he wasn't their real dad. Stu and I though, we knew what he did for us. We wanted him to be our dad. We maybe wanted it more than Mom did. Arthur was a hard man, but he was a good father." Rebecca pauses and looks out at the dim light that hums up from the city streets in the hours before sunrise.

Stuart was the only one left in the world who could remember with her. The only one who really knew what her life had been like. And now he was gone.

* * *

Against his family's wishes, John Arthur Hahn binds his life irrevocably to Lottie Andersen's. He rescues her four children and moves them to Rockford, Illinois to hide while his lawyers work to get her marriage dissolved. He moves them to a small flat above a dentist's office. His friend, the doctor, helps Lottie while Arthur goes back and forth between Rockford and La Crosse. They find a small parish school for the children to attend. Lottie helps in the doctor's office, filing and typing in the evening while the children sleep, beyond grateful for her new life.

Arthur comes from a family that has some standing in the community in La Crosse, along with some money. Once his mother gets wind of what he plans, she forbids it. Arthur is a 42-year-old, confirmed bachelor. He has an older brother who is married with children, as expected. However, he's the baby of the family, and no woman has ever been able to withstand his mother's disapproval. He asks no permission this time, and the threat of disinheritance doesn't phase him.

Lottie is set free by the courts, but not by the church. She's not Catholic, but he is. He cares. Still, the rules won't stop him from doing the right thing, and he marries her as soon as the State allows.

Arthur had political aspirations in La Crosse, and when it becomes known that he's in Rockford, he is welcomed. He knows many businessmen from when he travelled to secure contracts for his family's furniture store. His connections with the furniture manufacturers allow him into society and assure him of a place in local government. He receives stipends from several manufacturers as a consultant, which in turn allows him to adopt the children, change their surname, and move the family out of the dentist's flat. He purchases a house in the right neighborhood, secures for the children admission into the right school, and no one asks questions when he brings his new wife with her ready-made family into their community. It's not long, however, before the various businesses realize that Arthur has had a falling-out with his mother, and without the promise of this connection, the livelihood the community provides dwindles. One smaller manufacturer hires him as an over-seer. They hope to gain his insight into successful marketing practices and wish to capitalize on his family connection, should Arthur ever re-establish that association. The income they provide is a fraction of what he had depended on to support his new family, and his finances slowly deteriorate.

Ellen is born into the fleeting era of hope that Arthur provides. She is not quite two years old when their idyllic world comes apart. She contracts the measles, and shortly afterwards, Arthur's tuberculosis, flares up. First Ellen is in the hospital, then Arthur. While he's in the hospital, he defaults on the mortgage. A risky investment he's made goes bad, and the creditors begin coming to their door. The family is forced out of their house, and most of their furniture is repossessed. Temporary housing is provided to

them in a newer area of town that the Housing Authority calls “The Park.” It's provided courtesy of Arthur's city council colleagues, in their “deepest sympathy” for the state in which Arthur and his family find themselves.

The notion that children are flexible does not hold well in this circumstance. Though Rebecca and Stuart are old enough to understand what is happening and put it into some perspective, Clare and Mel struggle as they are moved out of the their beautiful house and have to leave the friends and school they love. They go back to the small parish school they attended before their mother's marriage to Arthur, where the children wear only hand-me-down uniforms and shoes. Their uptown manners and haircuts don't go over well with their old friends. It is a Catholic school, and once this community realizes that Lottie is divorced and remarried, the superiority that Clare and Mel have felt toward the other children is turned around on them.

It is this that determines Ellen's perception of life in this city. I expected some story like that of Rebecca's father throwing a baby across a room that causes my mother to hate Rockford. Instead, it's merely the recognition of what kind of family she belongs to that establishes her disillusionment. Rebecca tells me that it is the hiding that makes life in Rockford so difficult, but her worst fear was that her biological father could find them. It turns out that the hiding is only what brings them to Rockford. It is the coming out of hiding that destroys them.

After Stu's funeral, a luncheon put together by the Ladies of St. Michael's, and three trips to Cindy's house with my car full of flowers from the funeral home, my mom and I spend an hour saying our good-byes. On the drive back home, we listen to music instead of talking; she seems pretty talked out at this point.

My dad's still out of town when we arrive. I unload the car and get ready for bed while she goes out to the back porch for one last cigarette. I wait to say goodnight, but she doesn't come back in. I finally go out to check on her and find her just sitting there staring out at the night.

I sit down by her and share the quiet of the darkness.

After fifteen minutes or so she says, "All those people. That whole town. They all came." She spoke straight out to the darkness, never looked at me or even acknowledged I was there.

I watched her closely as I replied. "He was obviously well-loved."

"Cindy is his *third* wife. What a *mess* his life has been. That house would rot away around him while he sat on that smelly furniture. He's gone from one ridiculous broken-down car to another. When he lived near us, his car was always breaking down somewhere, and Dad was always helping him fix it."

"Everyone loved Stu. After Rebecca went to live with Grandma Birdie, and Mel and Clare hated me, Stuart was still nice to me."

"What? Why would Mel and Clare hate you?"

“They said I wasn’t really their sister, and that I was Grandpa Arthur’s favorite. They would call him Arthur behind his back, and I was ‘Arthur’s girl.’ I never really understood why they thought he spoiled me. I got all of their hand-me-downs, clothes and toys, and never had anything of my own.” She looked down at herself, her shirt front, her sleeves, her lap, as if she had on the barely tolerable hand-me-downs.

“Was that when you were sick all the time? Maybe they were jealous because of all the time you got to spend with him.”

“Maybe. But most of that time I spent with Grandma. Grandpa wasn’t mean, you know? But he was tough. And they didn’t listen. They made themselves miserable that way. He was clear in his expectations, but they just refused to follow directions.” My mom has told me many stories of them coming in after curfew or not doing chores. She never could understand why someone wouldn’t just do the thing that would make their parents happy. She still doesn’t.

She pulls her arms tighter around her as if she’s found a chill on the hot July evening, and continues talking. “Clare was already in fourth grade when I started first grade. I didn’t understand how much she hated me until one day, I went over at recess to play with her and her friend Janet. Janet was new at school, and I realize now that Clare had been trying to win her over before she learned the truth about us, but I didn’t understand that then. I didn’t even know that Clare and I were only half sisters. I couldn’t possibly understand what that meant really, anyway.

“Janet was asking Clare about our family, if it was true that our dad didn’t live with us. He had just moved into the sanatorium full-time because of his tuberculosis.

Clare told her that he had to go live in the hospital because I had made him sick.” She pauses here and turns to look at me. “She actually said, ‘After Ellie was born, she got sick a lot. And then Arthur got sick too. The rest of us are immune because we are not really his kids.’ I saw her say that to Clare.”

When my mom says she “saw her say that,” she means it literally. My mom reads lips. This was not something she even realized that she did until she was an adult. Whenever I point this out to her, she just shrugs. It is what it is, you know.

“I ran up to her, and pulled on her arm, and I told her to take it back. ‘He’s your dad too!’ I told her. I knew he was because I had heard her call him ‘Dad.’ She said: ‘I only do that because Mom makes me!’” Here, my mom stops to get out a cigarette. It’s during this trip that I recognize one of the advantages of smoking is that smokers always have something to do with their hands, to distract them for long enough to gather their thoughts and take a breath.

“Clare looked into my face that day with a hatred that has marked me permanently. She told me it was my fault that we had to move out of our beautiful house, my fault we no longer had nice clothes. If I hadn’t been born my father would not be sick and my mother would not have to go to work every day. She told me she would *never* be my sister.”

“But now, mom, now you and Clare are close. Right?” My hand is on her back. I want to comfort her. I want to remind her that she now lives in the present and that she is loved.

She laughs a little through her exhausted tears.

“After Grandpa Arthur’s funeral, she apologized. I reminded her during some conversation we had that day of what she had said about him when we were young. Of how she had blamed me. She was ashamed, she said, and had convinced herself that I didn’t remember, or hadn’t understood, or possibly hadn’t even heard.”

“She apologized twenty years later?”

“Times were hard for everyone back then. Finally, Grandma Birdie came and took Clare home with her too. She wanted all us girls, but Mom wouldn’t let me go because of my ears. But it was Stu who helped me back then. Stu who treated me like a little sister. He had gotten a job at the Woolworth’s unloading trucks and stocking shelves, and he had to go to work after school, but he would bring me home little treats. A caramel, a pretty button. Sometimes, he would bring me a length of lace. Mom always had him bring home the scraps from the sewing department.”

She smiled, “It was a different world then. Those children at my school judged us because my mother was divorced. Did you ever notice that Grandpa Arthur never went to church with us? He was the Catholic; he had insisted that we be raised Catholic and go to Catholic school, but he never went to church. When I confronted him about it, he told me that it was because he could not be forgiven for his sins. He even thought his marriage was a sin. She was someone else’s wife.

“Stuart’s view of the world was never limited like that.” She seemed to think about that a minute and then said, “And I think the world is a better place now. Look at how that town came out for Stuart over the last couple days. They could see what a beautiful person he was, see beyond his... mess.”

She believes this then, that the world is a better place. Now that she has new shoes, new coats, plenty to eat. She is someone who knows what it's like to go without. Even after Grandpa Arthur's parents relented, and brought him back to La Crosse to live in a sanatorium near them, after they moved his family into a flat in La Crosse and helped the kids enroll in school there, even then Grandma Lottie worked two jobs and each of the kids had to take on janitorial duties at school to help pay their tuition. Even then, they could only afford to eat meat once a week. My mom sometimes still jokes about "101 ways to eat cornmeal mush" or about all the things her mom could do with the hambone someone else would have thrown away. Yes, my mother knew what it was like to go without. What it was like to be judged.

She has worked hard to rise above that life. She and my father have given much back to their community, as did Uncle Stuart. But I still have those photographs of Rockford. Her old neighborhood is still there, even if she doesn't live there anymore.

Disreputable Uncles

With the women out for the night, freedom reigned. The men could curse, fart, warp the children. It wasn't often the women of the family got a night out together, but about once a year, usually while various family members were in town for the week, the women would demand a night for themselves, and the men would have to "baby-sit." Some of the women in my family took exception to the term "baby-sit," since, in fact, you don't baby-sit *your own children*. But, in an era where child-rearing was largely a mother's concern, the fact that these men were willing to be involved with their children's upbringing at all gave them a tick in the "good father" column. Their earnest desire to "corrupt" us children, also worked in their favor, at least as far as we children were concerned. These were not irresponsible men, predominantly. However, they had all grown up together, and when they reconvened, it was like the neighborhood gang being reunited; they tended to regress and to show off in ways that they wouldn't in other spheres of their lives. They would probably find a place to drag race too, if they thought they could get away with it. Really though, they never taught us anything truly harmful — just things our mothers and aunts would disapprove of — offensive language, off-color jokes, spitting techniques. And I would have never learned how to play poker, the right way, if it hadn't been for these cut-throat baby-sitters.

You could find a variety of card games to join at our family gatherings, but the men's poker game was almost sacred and remained fairly well protected by disapproving women. The women allowed the men to have that one night to themselves, just as they demanded their own. During a typical nine day vacation, when the whole clan would converge at my grandmother's and overwhelm her rambling two-story house (I had eighteen cousins on my mother's side alone), a reprieve for a night could be essential for the mental health of all. For the men, "baby-sitting" actually meant an extra poker night. They sent the kids down to the basement or out to the huge enclosed sun-porch to play, filled the refrigerator with beer and soda pop and ran out for pizza.

The men would congregate near the fridge, usually in their undershirts and lucky hats, popping beer tabs and tapping their cigarette ashes into the free-standing ashtrays that usually sat next to the pair of recliners in my grandmother's living room. The smell of poker would waft out of the swinging door that connected the huge country kitchen to the living room where I would crouch on the green shag carpet, straining to catch every possible glimpse into the men's world. Glasses of amber liquid and the gold trim on the Blatz Beer cans would catch the dimmed light, and the smoke from the Pall Mall Reds and Marlboros would float upwards to settle in a haze around the heads of the gathered men. My mother's brothers—Uncle Stuart, Uncle Moke, and Uncle Mel along with my dad and the other major player, a brother-in-law, Uncle Ron—reminded me of pictures I had seen of the gods on Mount Olympus, sitting around my grandma's table, the top of their heads obscured by the cloud of smoke that five two-pack-a-day smokers could create in a contained space. The male occupied kitchen changed the energy in the house... made it feel as if other uncommon things, even exciting things, might be allowed

to happen. I would sneak in when I could, scooting into the corner on the side of the refrigerator, usually reserved for mops and brooms and my grandma's spin-top garbage can. I loved to watch them shuffle and deal the cards, flipping the nickels and quarters into the middle of the Formica table. When the winner of a hand dragged a pile of coins across the table to rest in front of him, I would watch the shiny silver reflecting off the lenses of Uncle Stu's round glasses, and sometimes I would squint, trying to read the mirrored image of the cards there as well. While the men waited for a player to show up, or during a beer run, they might let me join a couple quick hands.

It was during one of these nights, when I was ten, give or take a year, and there were no women around to chase me off, that a stranger came to play poker with my uncles. He was Uncle Ron's business associate, in from out-of-town. It was still early, and I had convinced a number of my cousins to get a game of our own going. The boys had built a "no girls allowed" fort in the basement, but they allowed me to come in just for poker. The girls weren't much interested in poker anyway, and I wasn't particular about whose money I took. After a number of winning hands, I thought it best to leave before the boys held me down and took their money back. I crawled through the opening of the fort and ran up to the kitchen to show off my winnings to my uncles, feeling free to come and go without the aunts standing guard. As I came through the back hall, jingling the pennies and nickels caught up in my shirt, my father gave a loud "Shush!" and I stopped short. I could tell something was wrong. I looked from man to man, but the intensity of the players made the atmosphere of the room oppressive. Everything appeared normal: smoke-filled air, TV trays covered with slices of smoked sausage and

tubes of Ritz crackers, quarters and nickels stacked on the table, and the bottom three layers of the famous beer can pyramid they would build with their “empties.”

Then I saw him. He sat to the right of Uncle Stuart, with bills piled up in front of him. On occasion, a few dollar bills would come out at these games—usually to buy change—but my uncles played nickel ante, quarter limit, so it was uncommon to see so much green on the table. The stranger got up to get another beer. I watched him unfold his long body, legs taller than me, encased in brown polyester dress pants, a shiny silver buckle on his brown leather belt. He had discarded his tie – it was hanging on the back of his chair – and rolled back his shirtsleeves. His size was overwhelming. Never in my life had I seen someone taller than the refrigerator, the men in my family all being under six foot. This stranger had dark eyes and brown lips that matched his belt. His eyebrows and slicked-back hair looked as if they might have gotten their grayness from the smoke that almost completely enveloped his head when he stood. A thick cigar dangled from long fingers, its odd smell rising to mingle with the cigarette smoke overhead. I wanted to ask someone what that man was doing here, but when I started to speak Stu gave me a small, tight shake of his head. I went through the room to hide my winnings in the back hall, behind my grandma’s potted plants, and then sat on my stool in front of the plant, waiting for someone to come my way to use the bathroom, so I could ask what was going on.

Moke and Stu came down the hall less than ten minutes after I took up my post. Uncle Moke was the groundskeeper for the main cemetery in La Crosse, and the creases of his tanned face showed almost as white as the T-shirt under his blue-jean western-style

shirt. His over-grown eyebrows, almost as bushy as his mustache, jumped up and down in agitation.

“Jesus!” he cursed. “Doesn’t Ron know better than to bring someone like that along?”

“I don’t think he realized the guy would want to play for real money.” Uncle Stu seemed concerned, which made me worried.

“He’s a shark.” Moke pushed Stu’s shoulder. “But I’ve seen you tame worse.”

Uncle Moke was right. I’d watched Stu, calmly and sweetly, empty everyone’s pockets around a table, while he told jokes and stories. Everyone had such a good time playing with him that they never cared much if they lost. But it was his brothers and brothers-in-law that played here. I’d never seen him play against a stranger.

“Well James ought to have him down soon. He’s a regular shark himself.” Stu was talking about my dad. I hadn’t been able to get a read on my dad in the few minutes I’d been in the kitchen. He was tense, that was clear, but he had such a poker face, you could never tell if he had a nickel in the pot or the family car. I wanted to ask them questions, but I knew better than to interrupt.

“How much you got left?” Moke asked Stu.

“I’m almost tapped out, ya’ know. Didn’t bring that much. I figured I’d just be playin’ with you guys and you would feed my cup.” Stu’s mustache twitched as the edge of his lip crept up.

“Yeah, you just better watch who you’re pokin’!” Moke and Stu reminded me of my own brothers, messing with each other like they did. I had seen them argue before, yelling and really pushing each other, and although Stu was both wider and taller than

Moke, there was no doubt in my mind who would win the fight, if one ever started. My Grandma Lottie had recently moved back to the old neighborhood where my uncles, my dad, and now a few of my cousins, had grown up. The stories were passed down with the bicycles and baseball mitts. Moke might be small, but he was fast, and it was rumored that he knew how to use what weight he had. I imagined him moving with the speed of Bruce Lee, and I wondered if Moke had learned any karate when he was in Vietnam.

There was no fight in sight tonight, at least not between them. It seemed they had joined forces against the stranger. Moke reached in his pocket and pulled out a small wad of bills. He licked his thumb and peeled back a few from the outside of the roll. “Here’s fifty. I think we should all hit Ron up for cash. He’s always showing off the green in his pocket.” He pushed the bills into Uncle Stu’s chest.

Looking at the money, Stu said, “Ya’ know, you’ll need this later yourself.”

“Got enough in my pocket to keep me busy.” Moke laughed, “Anyway, it’s more likely to be around later if you’ve got it.” Moke disappeared into the bathroom. My mom always said that for someone with nothing, Moke always had a lot of cash on him.

When Moke came out of the bathroom and held the door for Stu, Stu asked if he was going to give any money to Mel. Moke laughed an unfunny laugh and said he might as well burn his money as give it to Mel. Stuart looked down at his feet, as he turned and pushed the bathroom door closed.

Moke stepped toward me. He put three twenties into my hand, folding my fingers over the bills. “Mattie, give this to your dad when he comes to use the john.” I nodded, and he bent down to kiss the top of my head, but then leaned past me, reaching into the huge potted peace lily on the plant stand behind me. I thought maybe he found my

baggie of coins back there, but when he spun around, I caught the flash of a glass bottle in his hand – and the red and gold letters of the whiskey Uncle Mel drank. He swore quietly and moved off toward the kitchen. Stu came out of the bathroom looking serious and worried and didn't notice me sitting there at all.

Uncle Mel came down the hall next and, weaving sadly, he bumped the wall, up-ending one of my grandma's portrait collages. I jumped up to save it, and he went by without a word, not even turning on the bathroom light before he closed the door.

Several years ago, Mel's oldest son had been hit by a car while he was walking home from a friend's house. He was killed instantly. Christopher had been the "golden child" as far as his parents were concerned, and after his death, no child could live up to his memory. Mel and Maureen sometimes talked about him like he would walk in the door at any time. All of us cousins missed him too, of course, but Christopher had not really been a very nice person, so maybe we didn't miss him as much as we should have. Aunt Maureen was pregnant at the time, and following the accident, she had to stay in bed. When Mel lost his job, he and Maureen and my two cousins came to stay with us. I remember he and Aunt Maureen getting into a fight about how much he drank and I heard her say that he drank all their money. He did find work again eventually, but even after we moved west, whenever we visited their house, we stopped at the grocery store first. We'd walk in, brown bags overflowing, and my mom would roll her eyes toward my brothers and say: "Well, we could hardly come empty handed. These boys will eat you out of house and home!"

I wondered if my mom would approve of the stranger being there. She liked poker games. Although other women in the family didn't approve, I think she didn't

really mind that I learned to play. To her, it was just another card game. And she could certainly hold her own in a serious game of cards. My father quit playing Canasta with her early in their marriage because, he said, “She plays for blood.” In her family the game was called “Nasty.” But when I was a child, and she taught my brothers and me to play cards, you’d have thought you were playing with Florence Nightingale. She would never dump the queen on you in Hearts, bid you up in Pinochle, or kill your loner in Euchre. No, my mother had nothing against poker, but I knew she would want to make sure that money stayed in the family.

When my dad finally came down the back hall, I passed him the money from Moke and asked if he was winning.

“You just worry about keeping your pizza and ice cream *inside* your stomach tonight, young lady, and everything will be fine.” He rubbed my head hard as he went by, but he wouldn’t look into my eyes.

I waited for an opportunity, any commotion, to slide my stool around the corner into the kitchen. I figured if I could get situated between the rubber tree and the shelves of my grandma’s cookbooks, I would be unobtrusive and have a good vantage point. I thought about the reasons Moke might give his money to my dad and Stu. He was an all right player himself. He always acted drunk, so you never knew when he really was. But because of the stakes, things were pretty quiet, the normal jokes and laughter curbed with the knowledge that the grocery money for the week now lay in the hands of someone who wouldn’t even invite them over for dinner.

Moke had split up his money because, simply put, my father and Stuart were the best players at the table. I thought of the many card games I’d played with my dad. In

our house, he is unbeatable, and he would never cheat to let us win. Playing with my mother was more enjoyable: She was gentle with us, but honestly the experience did us no good when we later faced real adversity, particularly in the form of an older cousin who could read the glee on your face when you had a winning hand, or could turn you into a stuttering, card-dropping mess with his own withering stare. No, playing against my father, who is a daunting opponent, toughened us up—he has no tolerance for wet eyes and quivering lips. In games like Euchre, he can figure out where the cards are just from the bidding. He knows how each person plays and will have his card lying face down on the table *before* the lead, so all he has to do is turn his card over and lay it on the trick. He won't play Dirty Clubs though because trump can be decided by the turn of a card. He definitely likes games that he can control. Like Black Jack. He once paid for a two-week family vacation driving around the American West by stopping for a day in Vegas to hit the casinos. The pit bosses don't know it, but he counts cards. He knows what's out and what's not. I'm not sure how he manages it at those tables where they play with four decks, but he seems to know what the odds are for each hand. When he plays poker, nothing's wild. And when he plays with kids, there's no crying allowed.

There's a lot to learn from playing with my dad – everyone needs practice learning how to lose – but you can only learn his technique if you have the aptitude for it. Most people just can't remember all those cards. Tonight, and at most family poker games, my dad faces another obstacle. They call it "Dealer's Choice." You make anything wild you want, in any game. It changes the odds. It changes the cards.

Now, Uncle Stuart didn't have a calculator for a brain and he won just as much as my dad, maybe more. But Stu's technique was different. He was lucky, and he used that luck to throw people off. He kept you on the defensive and even when he wasn't lucky, he acted like he was. He wouldn't test his luck, though; he would use it and get out quickly, knowing when to fold instinctively. He could feel your anxiety. My dad knew cards; my uncle knew people.

Stuart never allowed people to talk about upsetting things at the card table. If people are upset about something else, he couldn't gauge their response to the cards. He always played better when the women were out. Amazing how a few hovering females can really change the dynamics in a card game. There were no women tonight, but if the wind didn't change, the game would be over just the same. By the time I got myself situated in the kitchen, even I could tell that the anxiety in the room was taking its toll.

As Stuart leaned over the table to deal the next hand his bulk cast a shadow that threw the pot into dimness. His lucky hat, a brown fedora, was tipped forward on his head, and the look on his face seemed to match the darkness that enshrouded it. He looked grim as the betting went around the table.

Mel's face looked curiously like a clown's, and I imagined I could smell the sweetness of his breath from where I sat, but neither of his brothers nor my dad would shame him by banishing him from the table. When the bet reached him he called and raised, a bit boisterous in his certainty.

"So, is that your car payment?" Stu indicated the pot, only half-joking.

"Hell no, that's next month's rent!" Mel spouted back. The stranger laughed, as if this were a big joke, and Mel had revealed the punch line. Stu hesitated a little over his

call and I wondered if he would stay to help protect Mel's money. He didn't, following his instinct, like he had taught me. Mel proudly displayed a full house, eights over tens. A pretty good hand for five-card draw. He must have forgotten though that deuces were wild, which changed the odds dramatically, and the stranger had one in his hand, giving him a full house as well, queens over fours. Stuart exhaled. Moke got up to get a beer. My dad began shuffling the cards. Ron examined his shoe, and I imagined his guilty face shining back up at him from the polished patent leather tip. Mel said he would sit out a few hands and went outside for some air. I heard him a few minutes later rummaging around in the back hall, and I held my breath hoping he wouldn't knock over plants or pictures in his search. But the only banging we heard was the door leading onto the back porch and two seconds later the screen door slammed as Mel's unsteady feet pounded the slats of the wooden steps.

"Excuse me." Uncle Stu pushed himself away from the table and headed toward the back hall. I heard the doors bang and slam again as Stu seemed to follow in Mel's footsteps. Slowly setting the cards down on the table, my dad tipped his chair back on two legs to reach the door of the fridge, and snatched a beer from the top shelf. By the time his chair was back on four legs, Stu was coming through the back door. He threw a set of keys to Moke, who opened the drawer behind him. It was the "pencil drawer" which held the pads and pencils for games and lists, but also had a container for batteries, one for the keys to the garage and the shed, and one with spare keys to neighbors' and friends' houses. He quietly deposited the keys and turned back to the table. My dad called "Five Card Draw, Jacks or Better – Nothing Wild" and proceeded to deal.

The stranger sat between my dad and Stuart, which seemed pretty strategic on the part of my family. My dad was faring all right, having figured out the stranger's style, but as he was sitting behind him, he was still at a disadvantage. He never knew the guy's intentions until the bet was past him, and unless he had a solid hand, he lost his bets consistently. The stud hands like "Chicago" with changing wild cards in the hole were killing him.

My father rubbed his neck beneath his collar and called me over to him. He told me to bring up more beer from the basement fridge. I ran through the back hall and down the stairs, hoping to miss only the deal. At this point in the game, big things could happen. I pulled my shirt up from my waistband and piled in beer cans the same way I had collected my winnings earlier. As I closed the refrigerator door, I lost my grip on my shirt and the beer toppled out. I managed to catch a couple before they hit floor, but the rest scattered. I rushed to gather the rolling cans, careful to get them completely into my shirt. I took the stairs double-time, out of breath as I entered the kitchen.

I handed a beer to my father and began loading the rest into the fridge when Uncle Ron and the stranger both called for "refills." My dad popped his tab. The top just barely foamed. The moment the other two men pulled their tabs, all hell broke loose. Beer foam shot everywhere. My father's "damn," Stu's "Christ Jesus" and Ron's "fuckin' hell" were punctuated by Uncle Moke's "Holy Shit!" as they wiped their faces on their sleeves and rescued the cards. I cringed, knowing I would be banned for this mess, when suddenly my cousin Eddie came through the swinging door, his shirt stained with some unrecognizable food. His hair was pushed back and appeared plastered there and the

pungent smell he brought with him gave him away before his five-year-old voice could whine out, “Daddeee, I puuuked!” His jaw went slack and his eyes were half-closed.

“Where?” Three voices asked at once, everyone turning to look at Uncle Ron, whose head was now hanging in dejection.

“The front hall.” Eddie whimpered. I slunk my way around the corner of the fridge and out of sight. I wasn’t coming back out until Ron, or someone else, had started cleaning up the mess. The other kids began coming to the door, complaining of the smell and their own stomachs. Moke was out of his seat in a sober second, herding the kids out toward the sun-porch and into the fresh air. Ron headed for the front hall, stopping only for a bucket and rag from the pantry. Stu and my dad began cleaning up beer, drying cards and dabbing at the money on the spattered table. Dishtowel in hand, I offered my help and immediately the teasing began. My uncles were fiends when they had someone to poke fun at. I didn’t really mind, pleased to be teased instead of scolded and, enjoying the attention, I laughed.

“Oh, so you think it’s funny do you?!” Stu caught me around the middle and tickled me until I squealed. When he tickled us kids, Stu often laughed harder than we did. He became winded from this game and had to sit down for a breather. Meanwhile, the stranger began stacking his money. I watched his hands while he folded the thick stack of bills, as if to put them away. My father, still wiping up beer, leaned across the table, placing his hand on the stranger’s, reassuring him in no uncertain terms that the game was far from over.

The room had warmed up considerably and the stranger unbuttoned his shirt, slipped out of it and hung it on the back of his chair over his tie. He sat down in his t-

shirt and stretched out his long legs. Tipping his head back he took a long swig of beer. As he leaned forward to deposit the empty can on the table a short, quick belch popped out of his mouth. He looked only slightly apologetic. He didn't know it yet, but this move toward the informal would prove to be his downfall.

I studied him closely and noticed how amused he seemed to be by the now comings and goings of the children. While some had been awakened by the commotion, others looked to be part of a continuing hub of activity taking place in the front rooms of the house. The stranger threw his head back once and hooted with laughter as my four-year old cousin David came into the kitchen made-up, complete with blue metallic eye shadow, red lipstick, pink rouge and black pencil lines drawn over his golden brows. The kitchen had lost its intensity. Some of my cousins came in to question me, the boys wanting to know what was happening in here this evening, the girls still not understanding what could lure me away from the modeling and singing contests they were holding on the sun porch. One of my cousins passed me a note, the seal on the envelope marked by the dark pink print of lips. The scent of my grandma's Windsong perfume floated up from the envelope. I was not even a little tempted by the sweet scent and pushed the note into my back pocket. The game had not yet resumed, so players were taking this opportunity to use the bathroom, refill their drinks and carry another half-case of non-agitated beer up from the basement.

As the group filled in their places at the table, with Uncle Mel finally coming in from the back porch, I crept over to Uncle Stu's side. With my mouth close to his ear, I asked, "How come you don't play Omaha?" The cards lay in front of him, and it was his deal. He announced the game, and my father groaned, for this was his least favorite

game. Too many variables. It was, however, my uncle's favorite, and later he confided to me that he thought it changed the rhythm of the whole night.

"I can see that you're going to be my lucky charm the rest of the evening," Stu said to me. "You just bring that little stool up closer." Children revived him, he often said. I quickly pulled my stool over, so I was between him and Moke.

Although my father functioned best in stressful situations, the change of atmosphere didn't affect him much. He could focus through anything: a few whiny kids and little beer foam was nothing. The stranger, however, was a bit perturbed that a child was so close to the table.

"Isn't the smoke bad for her...won't it stunt her growth or something?" He grumbled. Up close, his lips looked soft and glossy, like my mother's leather driving gloves, and there was a groove in his lower lip, left of center, which, I saw a second later, was the perfect size for the cigarette that he had discarded his cigar for. I began to stare, watching the cigarette roll a little to the outside of the dip as he talked with it in his mouth. "I thought this was the big boys' game here."

Moke, sounding drunk, wobbled his head and waved his hand unsteadily in front of the stranger's face, breaking through my hypnotic gaze. "Never underestimate a short person." He said blearily, but even with his eye's half-crossed, I knew he meant what he said. For this one moment, I hoped I wouldn't grow much taller; I liked having shortness in common with him. "Hell, she hangs around us so much she's probably as addicted to nicotine as she is to cards." He threw his arm over my shoulder, puckered up and kissed me on the cheek. Moke turned then and looked at Ron. "So, quite a friend you brought with you tonight, hey? Takes all our money and insults our children? Did ya' tell him

this was the “Uncles” game – as in uncles of kids – as in the kids are here?” His words seemed hard. But he didn’t look mad. He looked drunk, a lot like Mel did earlier when he went out back. He swayed in his chair and every once in a while grabbed the table with his hand, like he was stopping it from scooting away. He didn’t even sound mad, but the stranger didn’t know what to make of what he was saying.

“Listen, buddy, if you want to start something...”

Ron cut him off. “C’mon, he’s a just a little drunk and stupid. You came to play, right? Let’s just play.” Ron tilted his head toward the stranger and spoke more softly.

“Let him be stupid by himself. Sure can’t hurt our game, ya’ know?”

“Yeah, let’s play.” Moke leaned forward to add emphasis. “You brought your lucky cigars,” he waved his hand to the cigarette now hanging out of the stranger’s mouth and looked confused. “Well, now we got our lucky lady.” He laid his palms flat on the table, appearing to hold himself up with them. Then he leaned menacingly toward the stranger. “And, I ain’t your ‘buddy.’”

My dad and Uncle Stu had said nothing through this exchange. Instead, my dad leaned back and pulled another beer out and handed it over. Stu tipped it a little sideways and held it directly in front of my face as he put his finger in the tab. “Dare me?” He said to me. I squeezed my eyes shut and shook my head. I heard the tab pop from further away, and opened my eyes as he set the quiet-looking beer on a TV tray between he and the stranger. He smiled at me. “Omaha it is.” He began to deal. “Omaha, Nebraska. Now there’s a town for you...”

Stu told one silly story after the other and raked in his winnings. My father fared a bit better than before, taking some of the largest pots. He seemed to be mainly giving

Ron a hard time, always raising his bids – pushing him to show his cards – maybe making him sweat for getting them all into this. The stranger seemed happy enough, his winnings from earlier holding him. Sometimes, when he would lose a few hands in a row, or not win when he was certain that he would, he got agitated and made some snide comments – usually directed toward Ron. Stu distracted him easily enough and Moke entertained everyone with his inappropriate jokes. He won a few rowdy stud duels with the stranger, his seeming drunkenness never changing and never interfering in his card-playing ability. In sharp contrast, Mel sunk honestly deeper into an alcoholic stupor. The stream of requests from the kids slowed to a trickle again, and only occasionally would a hand stall as a father got up from the table to tend to some need.

After a complete round went by where Stu had not won a hand, I quickly suggested that he play two- or three-card Guts. Omaha was his favorite game, but he was best at Guts. The room was very relaxed now, and Stu seemed to have a good handle on the group around him. This game in particular was about perception, knowing when to stay, and when to fold. If you stayed and won, you took the pot. If you lost, you had to match the pot. The game would go on until the pot was tapped out. As long as at least two people stayed, the pot rejuvenated itself and the dealer kept dealing. Unlike Omaha or Baseball or Chicago, which lasted one short hand each, Guts could last anywhere from five minutes to thirty—longer in some cases. It was nearing midnight and the time the women would arrive home, and, although our stranger didn't know it, this would be the last game of the night.

Stu manipulated each hand, staying in sometimes, just so the pot wouldn't tap out too early. He drew people in on a bluff hand, tripling the pot, and people started playing

more carefully. Stu had chosen two-card Guts, thinking he'd have my dad on his side. During two-card Guts, much like Black Jack, you buried the used cards, and shuffled only when necessary. My father knew every card that was buried.

The pot grew until the only three at the table who could cover it were my dad, Stu and the stranger. Over half the deck was buried, the high cards mostly out. I watched over his shoulder as Stu drew a Jack and a ten. Good cards. The last Jack in the stack, I thought. I knew I had seen the Kings and the Aces go by but I racked my brain over the fourth Queen. Of course, there were always pairs. Someone could take that pot with a pair of twos. My dad was first to decide if he was staying. He knew what was out, how good his pair was — if he had one — and what the odds were. My dad bluffed rarely, and had a straight poker face so you could never tell. This time, he allowed his mouth to turn up at the corner on one side and raised his brows. He had the look that my brother used when he was challenged to a fight by a kid he knew he could whoop. Serious, but not too concerned. He began to speak, hesitated, then said, “Well, I guess I’m in, just this one last time.” His voice sounded worried, contrasting sharply with his relaxed position on the kitchen chair.

The stranger studied my dad’s face closely, unsure of what he should do. Apparently he didn’t know if he should trust the voice or the face. If the stranger chose not to stay, he probably would never know. If he and Stuart both folded, my dad would take the pot, and wouldn’t be required to show his hand. The stranger looked down at his winnings. He was still up, but if he stayed and lost, he was wiped out. He could only cover that pot once. “I’m in.” He looked down at his cards and shook them a little at us, “These babies are winners.” He said with a smile.

In the time that it took the stranger to decide what to do, Stu had summed up the situation and made his choice. Without deliberation, he folded. He told me later that he'd decided to let my dad and the stranger battle it out this hand. If my dad lost he wouldn't be able to cover another pot, but Stuart would still be able to get in the next round. He told me that he didn't even know which was the bluff, the voice or the face, but he could tell that my dad felt confident, and he wasn't going to get in the way.

Clenching them tightly, the stranger slowly tipped his cards, revealing a Queen and an eight. Good cards for Guts, especially this late in the shuffle. But not good enough to win. My dad laid his cards, showing a pair of nines, the only thing that could have beat him was a pair of tens, because everything else was out. He cupped his hands over the pot and dragged it to his edge of the table. The stranger yelled, "Piss!" and threw his cards into the middle of the table. The pile of money in front of him was barely enough to cover the pot. He was done, and he knew it. He sucked in a chest-full of smokey air and with his hands flat on the table, thumbs wrapped around the edge, he began to push himself up. I had the feeling that he might flip the table over, like my brother would do to the card table in our basement when he lost a game or his card-house collapsed. In one motion, I dropped my leg off of my stool, and side-stepped to duck behind Stu. I felt Stu's body shift and tighten. Both my father and my uncles were on their feet, kitchen chairs pushed back to the outmost edges of the kitchen, before the stranger had reached his full height. Thinking to calm him, Stu reached his hand out to touch the strangers' arm saying, "Hey, man—" His words were cut short by a long arm swinging, not like a punch, but more like the rotation of a wind-mill blade, as he shrugged off Stu's hand with such force that Stu stepped backward, and tripped over me.

I couldn't stop myself from going down, landed on the floor on my side and tried to roll out of the way. While Stu attempted to regain his balance without crushing me, my dad moved in closer to the stranger. His face, always controlled even in anger, had a surprised look. His eyes, usually narrow and steady – the eyes that could pin you to the wall when he caught you up to no good – were wide open and jumping from the stranger to Stu to me. He was mad, I thought, that I had gotten in the way and caused Stu to trip.

“You ass!” He snarled in a way that made him seem less like my dad and more like the scary dog on the corner of our block that spent every day in a small, fenced yard chained to a pole. “That’s my *daughter* you’re knocking around!” And he went straight at the guy, who was still in the midst of his own angry eruption. Whether the stranger meant to hit my dad or not is still unclear to me, but his arm rotated around, and in the same way that he shrugged off Stu’s gentle hand, he ward off my dad’s attack. The two forces collided and with a huge “Humpf!” my father went backwards into the fridge. He slid to the floor, winded, confused.

Stuart had reached behind him and his big hands had me around the middle. Although he touched me softly, I felt squeezed so tightly I could hardly breathe. He gently steered me backwards towards the corner formed by the kitchen cupboards about a yard behind me. By the time I was trapped in the triangular cocoon created by the corner and the wall of my uncle’s back, I realized that the squeezing had been coming from inside my own body. I wrapped my palm around Stu’s thick index finger and hung on hard.

Uncle Ron moved over to help my dad regain his feet and his control, and Mel wisely retreated, toward the swinging door. Moke advanced. He caught a rounded end of

the oblong table and slid it hard so the long side rested in front of my dad and Ron, trapping them between the table and the fridge. The cards and money slid towards the edge of the Formica surface, stopping just short of the edge. Two TV trays went flying as they were hit by the table, and as I surveyed the room from the safety of my shadowy triangle, I realized there were two other trays lying catty-wampus on the floor, apparently over-turned during the earlier scuffle. With his one powerful sweeping motion, Moke made a huge space in the middle of the kitchen, directly in front of the stranger, who immediately took a large step forward onto the empty floor. Moke, too, stepped forward, but only a small amount, leaving a cushion of air between he and the stranger.

The two of them looked almost comical standing there: Moke's compact frame put him about eye-level with the stranger's chest. The stranger looked down at him, and didn't seem to care that Moke was even standing there. He turned his head and looked at the money on the table, the bills having slid out of their piles. "Well," he said, "I'll just take my money and be on my way."

"Buddy," Ron's pleading voice came softly across the room, "c'mon, man." It seemed right that Ron should be the one talking to the guy. I reminded myself that they were friends. From where I stood, I could only see the back of the stranger's head, but the way he looked at Ron made Ron look at the floor.

The stranger began to move, as if to reach the table. Moke moved with him, at first it seemed he would just follow him, but then he closed the distance, and ended between the stranger and the table before the stranger had been able to take the two steps necessary to get there first. The stranger stopped abruptly, surprised apparently, at Moke's coordination and speed.

“I think, *buddy*,” Moke said in a straight, serious tone, “that this has been a long night of some pretty excitin’ card playin’.” He took a small step toward the stranger. “I, for one, had a lot of fun.” Another small step. The stranger shuffled his feet almost imperceptibly backward. “I mean, I lost a chunk of change, but, hey, that’s part of the game, right?” Moke’s foot came forward again. “I’m thinkin’ that, you’re right, this night is probably just about over. The ladies’ll be back soon, the children’ll be all tucked up in their beds, and I’m thinkin’ I’m about ready to hit the hay myself.”

Moke looked as awake as I have ever seen him. His eyes and his speech were clear; his voice and his stance lacked the wobbliness of his drunken stupor. As the stranger continued to shuffle backwards towards his chair, words seemed to elude him. Maybe the beer had finally overwhelmed his brain. The back of his calves hit the kitchen chair and with a loud thud, he was back in the same seat he had occupied all evening.

Later when I would relate this story to my cousins, some of the boys would insist that Moke had pulled his knife out of his belt, the one he always used to clean fish when he took the boys fishing on the Mississippi or the Black River near my grandmother’s. I would tell them no, that I wasn’t even sure Moke had his knife on him that night, but some of them argued that someone his size couldn’t get a big guy like that to quiet down and then to move backwards like that without some show of strength. I would argue back that someone like Moke didn’t need a knife to get the better of someone like the stranger.

When the stranger fell back into the chair, his arms flew up in surprise and his feet shot out in front of him. He hit the seat with such a force that I felt the cabinet door behind me vibrate. It was a funny thing to see, something from the Stooges, but I was surprised at myself for wanting to laugh in the midst of the debris that now littered my

grandmother's kitchen. But when the laugh came, it came from the stranger. It was like the thud hit him in the backside and just bounced right through him, flying out of his mouth in a shout-like laugh that surprised the rest of us into laughing too.

My dad cleared the money off the table and Ron pushed the table back into the center of the room. The rest of us laughed as we stooped to pick up stray cans and bottles off the floor. Even the stranger got up and helped. My dad instructed me to sweep up cigarette ashes and butts as he righted the over-turned free-standing ashtrays and TV trays. One of the thick glass bowl-like ashtrays had cracked down the center. I wondered for a minute if it was the one that always sat next to Grandpa Max's old recliner and had hardly been used since his death five years before. I couldn't decide if Grandma Lottie would miss it, or would be glad to finally have it gone.

As my dad handed him what was left of his money, the stranger made arrangements to sleep on Ron's couch, since he had blown his hotel allowance on the last pot. Mel finally stepped away from the door and several curious children stuck their heads in to see what the commotion was all about, and I realized that Mel had been guarding the door all along.

Moke stuck out his hand to the stranger and said, "It's not real hospitable, us taking all your money like that."

The man's eyes wandered to a child now standing in the doorway wearing a grandmother-like nightgown, fingernails and toenails painted bright red. "Well, some people are more attached to their money than others. I guess, for tonight, I'll have to be one of the others."

From the back of the house we could hear car doors slamming, the mufflerless sound of Stu's van having already warned us that the women were back. We were in trouble, of course —some of us more than the rest. Moke had recovered his hundred and ten dollars from my dad and Stu, but he was always in trouble anyway. Ron too had recovered the money he'd bankrolled early in the evening and it was lucky he'd loaned it out otherwise he probably would have lost it. He's not a very good poker player. From where I sat, back on my stool by the rubber tree plant, I could hear my dad and Stu, splitting up the winnings – pooling money to give to Aunt Maureen, deciding they would tell her Mel had lost it to them “fair and square,” which, I suppose, he had. This way she could pay a few bills before he took out for whiskey.

The fun was over. Stu and I knew it when Aunt Rosie walked in and gasped at the sight of me with my red-rimmed eyes looking up from beneath the brown fedora Stu had dropped on my head. The way she looked at me told me that I was not nearly so grown-up as these men had allowed me to feel for the past few hours. Stuart tried to explain, wrapping his hairy arm around my stained shirt, saying what a good little poker player I was. The women started gathering up clothing and toys and my mom broke out the Lysol disinfectant to attack the area where Eddie had fought his own losing battle that evening. Many of us spent the night, but none of the others left until everything was clean. After all, they “wouldn't dream of leaving Grandma Lottie with such a mess.” Aunt Maureen led my grandmother, who was not allowed to help with clean-up, straight up the back steps to her bedroom. However, knowing my girl cousins, there would be a big enough mess in that bedroom to keep her busy a while.

Tired now that the excitement was over, I shimmied around and kissed Uncle Stu “goodnight” and he smiled, telling me to be careful not to let Aunt Rosie smell my beer breath, and I thought of all the sips I had stolen from Stu’s can during the game to rinse the smoke off the back of my throat. I hugged and kissed aunts and uncles goodnight as I made my way through the house, finally finding my own mother and getting a once over and then a hug. Wandering through the shadowy front room trying in vain to locate my sleeping bag, I realized that this was a record for me; I had never before made it to the end of a poker night. As I picked through the living room and front porch, which were littered with half-sleeping children moaning about broken toys and stomach aches, I saw for the first time what the women saw upon their return. Mothers were shaking their heads and scolding the few children who were still awake: “Well, what did you think would happen? It’s not *good* for you!”

The next day I would suffer from a cigarette smoke hang-over and I wouldn’t be able to eat pizza or ice cream for weeks. But still, I’m glad those women went out on occasion. Maybe they were right when they said the lack of restraint wasn’t good for us. But when I remember watching those men and the way they behaved in that kitchen, so different from the way the women talked when they cooked or cleaned, or even when they played bridge in that same room, I know I absorbed something that neither my mother nor even my father could ever explain to me. Those men showed me something that night that I didn’t often get to see in our own homes: something honorable that we might admire in a hero in a movie. Something strong enough to hold us together on our worst days. I found my sleeping bag, wondering if John Wayne played cards when he

wasn't shooting bad guys. As I crawled in, I realized that I was going to sleep in my stained shirt and my mother hadn't said a thing.